

5 The Flood of 2013

The flood catastrophe in 2013 became the decisive catalyst that completed the transformation of the area into a hydroscape with the relocation of the Goddess onto the new concrete platform. The strength of the surge, which formed after several days of intermittent rain in the Himalayan region, ultimately forced the moving of the deity's statue, leaving only the option to save it—or that of Goddess Dhārī's terminal immersion in the river, her *jal samādhi*. At the same time, the natural disaster practically ended the debate as well as the culturally and ecologically motivated struggle that accompanied the reconstruction of the temple and the construction of the hydroelectric power plant. For the opponents, the forced resettlement of the Goddess became a symbol of their final defeat. With the created facts, the old temple (*mūl sthān*), inundated by silt and water, no longer offered a powerful vision for its once aspired preservation. This overarching sense of defeat likewise dashed any hope of preventing the completion of the dam project. The objective of this section is to shed light on the developments surrounding the 2013 flood. Within this frame, the first part describes the stagnant situation and the related discursive processes before the state of Uttarakhand was caught up in the disaster. The local perspective assumed here, suggests:

1. that the flood narratives established a year earlier exerted their influence on the further political debate and simultaneously on the progress of the hydropower plant project.
2. that in 2013 another flood event was instrumentalised, in this case for the finalisation of the temple re-settlement.

From the moment of the catastrophe, a clear cut emerges between the public discourses, namely those that unfolded before and those that followed the catastrophe. While the pre-flood phase is still largely characterised by locally debated considerations regarding the disputed temple site, in the post-flood part the theme of the deity shifts to a distinctly different level. In the post-catastrophic discourse, the local place turned into an object of national importance and became subjected to a national perspective. This was amplified by the influence of the national media, which lent a completely new quality to the narratives about the Goddess Dhārī, her place and the floods.

5.1 Stalemate—Before the Flood

5.1.1 Śubh Muhūrt—the Long Wait for the Auspicious Moment

The initial months of 2013 passed with preparations for the transfer of the Goddess to her new base. The concrete platform for the new temple was erected; the temple though remained under construction. The GVK had prepared a temporary structure on the upper level to accommodate the Goddess and intended to move the statue of Dhārī Devī at the earliest possible date. However, conditions for the relocation of the temple did not prove very conducive during this period owing to various factors. The first was that long negotiations were underway about the correct or the most favourable time, the *śubh muhūrt*, to move the Goddess and her accoutrements.²⁴⁸ The discussion circled around the most auspicious planetary constellation as proposed by the Hindu astrological system, the *jyotiṣ* , for the fulfilment of this task. A first date envisaged in this regard was the day of *makar sañkrānti* (Thapliyal 2013a) on January 14. According to observers, the GVK Company engaged in preparations for the big occasion, but avoided announcing any details regarding time and date, since concurrently vehement protest action was planned from the opponents.²⁴⁹ One reason for the company's hurry to finalise this last stage of the temple transition also resided in the fact that there were more cosmological obstacles waiting around the corner. A quote from the newspaper attributed to Vishweshwar Prasad Pandey, president of the Dhārī Devī Temple Pujārī Trust, informs that the upcoming period of *śukrāst*, which would last more than two months, from February 11 to April 24, 2013, is considered highly inauspicious for alterations to a sacred place and for the transfer of the statue. Instead, the trust's president advocated the day of *akṣaya tṛtīyā*²⁵⁰ on May 13 as a suitable timing for the statue's relocation.²⁵¹

248 The headline of this chapter is inspired by a similar headline from the newspaper Amar Ujālā: “धारी देवी की मूर्ति के अपलिफ्टिंग को मुहूर्त का इंतजार” (Amar Ujālā 2013, Jan. 12). “The wait for the auspicious moment to lift up the Dhārī Devī statue”

249 The opponents of the relocation had already feared that the hydropower company would carry out a sudden and secret transfer of the Goddess (Amar Ujālā 2013, Jan. 5).

250 *Akṣaya tṛtīyā* marks the beginning of the agricultural season. “Akshaya Tritiya literally means ‘inexhaustible third,’ and in this particular context it is the third day following the New Moon in the month of Vaisakha (May-June). [. . .] The significance of the term ‘akshaya’ can be directly understood principally in relation to food. It is therefore, natural that the agriculturist should celebrate a festival on this day in the hope of obtaining a bountiful harvest so that his granary may remain ‘akshaya,’ i.e. always full (with no decline)” (Gnanambal 2008:67f).

251 “शुक्रास्त में देवी का चालन या स्थापन जैसा शुभ कार्य नहीं किया जा सकता। अक्षय तृतीया के अवसर पर पारंपरिक वाद्य यंत्रों तथा शतचंडी पाठ के साथ देवी की मूर्ति को अपलिफ्ट कराया जाएगा।

Despite the plausible requirement of an opportune time to implement changes to a sacred place, there were however motivations involved that rendered this debate about the right moment not only tenacious, but also highly political. The extra emphasis on various adverse planetary conditions presumably came to the fore as several unresolved issues loomed in the village of Dhari, as well as in the surrounding communities. The villagers and even the explicit supporters of the temple relocation, the local *pūjārīs*, after seeing that the company did not fulfil demands for resettlement and other related compensations, appeared to turn hostile towards the plans of the company (Amar Ujālā 2013, Jan. 13).²⁵² They began to put up obstacles—and one means to interfere with the upcoming relocation may have been the raising of concerns about adverse cosmic conditions. As already noted during the debates about the deity’s history, the *pūjārīs* performed several flip-flops with respect to their stance on the transfer of the Goddess. While in some period they were seen hampering the Goddess’s relocation, at other times, they even expedited its completion. The different attitudes may have reflected the momentary state of the (financial) negotiations. Amidst these complications, January 14 and thus *makar saṅkrānti* had already passed, and as the next proposed dates in May reveal—a quick solution was not in sight.

On the other side, the protests of the religious actors continued to be fierce and even intensified in view of the imminent transfer of the statue—thus jeopardising the enterprise even more. Apart from the group of protesters sitting on a *dharnā* in Srinagar who managed to accomplish the 1100th day of their sit-in (Amar Ujālā 2013, June 12), also the opposing saints were still on a war footing against the relocation of Goddess Dhārī. One of their protest activities was to stage a Mā Dhārī Devī Rath Yātrā (religious procession) starting from the Dhārī Devī Temple, first to Haridwar for a *pūjā* (devotional ceremony) and then to the *mahākumbh*²⁵³ in Allahabad (now Prayagraj) (Amar Ujālā 2013, Jan. 11).²⁵⁴ Owing to the religious

इससे पूर्व यह कार्य संभव नहीं है। – विश्वेश्वर प्रसाद पांडे, अध्यक्ष धारी देवी मंदिर ट्रस्ट” (Thapliyal 2013b). “Auspicious tasks, such as the moving or installation of a goddess, cannot be performed during *śukrāst*. The statue of the Goddess will be relocated on the occasion of *akṣaya tṛtīyā*, accompanied by traditional instruments and the recitation of the *śatcaṇḍī pāṭh*. Vishweshwar Prasad Pandey, president of the Dhārī Devī Temple Trust.” After a request to the religious authority of the Badri Kedar Temple, the local *dharmādhikārī* had calculated the recommendation for this date, more precisely for two dates, May 13 and 18, and submitted it to the temple trust (Thapliyal 2013b).

252 “पुजारी लक्ष्मी प्रसाद पांडे कहते हैं विस्थापन सहित धारी गांव की विभिन्न मांगों पर यदि जीविके कार्रवाई नहीं करेगा तो अपलिफ्टिंग नहीं करने दी जाएगी।” (Thapliyal 2013a). “Pūjārī Lakshmi Prasad Pandey says that if the GVK does not take action on the various demands of Dhari village, including resettlement, then the transfer will not be allowed.”

253 The Mahā Kumbh Melā is the largest pilgrimage gathering of the world.

254 A copy of Goddess Dhārī had been created for this purpose (see Amar Ujālā 2013, Jan. 12).

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mega-event of the *mahākumbh*, which took place from January 14 until March 10, 2013, the GVK not only had to navigate its way through the jungle of cosmic prerequisites on the local level, but was now also forced to accommodate this overarching national spiritual gathering. In light of the major Hindu festival, the GVK Company officials felt obliged not to interfere with the religious feelings of the people and not to incite the wrath of the saints who had gathered at the *kumbh* at that time (Thapliyal 2013b).²⁵⁵ When finally May 13 had been agreed for the relocation of the Goddess, the MoEF suddenly issued another halt to any further work on the new temple and the planned transfer of the statue (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 11a). And even when this additional problem was solved and the MoEF had to withdraw its stop-work order after a court hearing, the villagers along the lake, still in the midst of unresolved compensation and resettlement issues, declared anew not to give their consent to further operations (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 22). One of the newspaper's subtitles at this point is indicative for the prevailing impasse situation: “धारी देवी मंदिर की मूर्तियों के शिफ्टिंग के मामले में गतिरोध” (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 22). “Deadlock on the matter of relocating the Dhārī Devī statue.” This gridlock essentially remained until the onset of the extreme rainfall in June. Although the GVK made additional concessions to the villagers' demands (Amar Ujālā 2013, June 1, June 6), the *pūjārīs* once again stepped in and prevented the deity's swift transfer by raising a new astrological concern. On June 11, 3 days before the start of the rain and 5 days before the culmination of the catastrophe, the *pūjārīs* presented their newly chosen dates. The statement they released said that the relocation could be carried out only after the end of the *br̥haspati ast* period (July 3), so they proposed July 10 or 14.

5.1.2 Old Flood in a New Guise, the Resurgence of Flood Memories one Year Later

In view of the stalemate described above, it is crucial to note that and in which way memories of the flood of 2012 resurfaced during this period. These flood imaginings on the one hand were meant to provide an impetus to restart the faltering processes. However, while the impact of the memorised flood proved not

255 “बताया जा रहा है कि कुंभ में एकजुट संतों से सावधान रहने और शुक्रास्त में कोई शुभ कार्य नहीं करने की वजह से जीबीके के सिपहसलारों ने कंपनी को धारी देवी की मूर्ति को फिलहाल स्थानांतरित नहीं करने की सलाह दी है। इसी वजह से कंपनी और मंदिर ट्रस्ट [sic] ने फिलहाल देवी की मूर्ति को अपलिफ्ट नहीं करने का फैसला किया है।” (Thapliyal 2013b). “It is said that out of consideration for the saints united in the *kumbh*, and given the fact that no auspicious tasks are performed during *śukrāst*, the chairpersons of the GVK have advised the company not to move the statue at that time. Therefore, the company and the temple trust have taken the decision not to raise the statue of Dhārī Devī for the time being.”

yet sufficient to induce the final transfer of the statue, it was only the coming flood's violent and direct agency that brought the breakthrough. Complementing the previous chapter on the flood in 2012, the following outlines how the preceding year's flood not only assumed agency along the pre-disaster discourse in 2013, but also how imaginaries about the earlier event extended their direct impact on the subsequent course of events and the upcoming flood.

Conceptions about the preceding flood first emerge as a line of reasoning against the protest activities of the saints. A key event in this respect was when Swami Sanand, one of the fiercest and most successful opponents of hydropower projects declared his intention to visit the Dhārī Devī Temple to pay obeisance to the deity. And this move came amidst an already charged atmosphere following the MoEF's work stoppage. Upon his arrival at the site, he is greeted with open hostility by local hydropower project supporters, who shout aggressive slogans and angrily wave black flags (Figure 12). As justification for their animosity towards the visiting *sādhu*, the reproachful question is raised, “where were these people when last year the disaster struck the village of Dhari?” (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13)

उन्होंने आरोप लगाया कि सानंद उत्तराखंड विरोधी हैं और परियोजनाओं को बंद करवा कर यहां के नौजवानों को बेरोजगार करने का षडयंत्र रच रहे हैं। बीते साल जब धारी गांव में आपदा आई, तब ये लोग कहाँ थे?

They alleged that Sanand is anti-Uttarakhand and is hatching a conspiracy to close down the projects and make the local youth unemployed. Last year, when the disaster struck in Dhari village, then where were these people? (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13).

By addressing him as “these people,” Swami Sanand aka G.D. Agrawal, is not perceived as a single actor or activist, but as a representative of the “saffron faction,” which is campaigning against the temple relocation. The reasoning of those in favour of the relocation again exhibits the deep divide between the local and supra-regional position towards the project or more generally towards development projects in the state. Sanand and his likes are depicted as enemies of the local people and ergo of the whole Uttarakhand because their demands run counter to the population's ambitions for development and future prosperity. The preceding flood is reframed in this context as a profoundly local experience and as a symbol of the detachment of the religious protesters. Following this view, only those who experienced the flood qualify as part of the local reality and therefore have the right to discuss the temple. This statement once again underlines the belief of the temple shifting supporters that the opposing *svāmīs* show no interest in the local people, their affairs and concerns. It additionally disputes their right



Figure 12. Dam Supporters waving black Flags at the Project Site in Protest of the Arrival of Swami Sanand (Source: Amar Ujālā 2013, May 13).

to participate in decision-making regarding matters of the temple. Accusations that the religiously motivated actors were absent when the villagers faced disaster and distress show how the memory of the 2012 flood impacts on the argumentation in favour of the new temple. In the discourse of 2013, the 2012 flood had been reshaped into an uncontrollable natural disaster that hit the locality by surprise a year earlier. Yet this version completely disregards the human role in the event and therefore evades holding the identified contributors to the disaster responsible.

Taken from a different angle, the 2012 floods formed a key element in the drafting of a risk scenario for the temple as the rainy season approached. This in turn became a tool to exert pressure. Particularly in response to the MoEF directive, stakeholders indicated on various occasions that the temple of the Goddess will be under renewed threat of submergence with the onset of the upcoming monsoon season—as it happened in 2012. It is obvious that the impending danger of a flood entails the pressing need to resettle the Goddess. With this in mind, representatives of the local administration, during an inspection visit to the temple, arbitrarily advised the temple committee to move the statue at the earliest possible time. According to the Amar Ujālā, the administration was concerned about the condition of the Goddess because of the upcoming rainy season and therefore even encouraged the temple officials to ignore the order of the Ministry of Environment

and Forests (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 15).²⁵⁶ The temple is certainly at risk because, like last year, all eight gates of the dam are closed in this pre-monsoon season (Amar Ujālā 2013, 12 May). But apparently no one addresses the illegality of the matter anymore, at least not traceably in the newspaper.

In a further comment on the MoEF's ban on construction, the newspaper highlights "the silence that has settled over the temple's surroundings" (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 12) and portrays the apprehensions spreading among the temple's *pūjārī* community. By then, the attitude of the *pūjārī* people had apparently changed again so that they fully supported the envisaged measures concerning the sacred place. The president of the temple trust is quoted as arguing for the relocation with the same line of reasoning as the authorities:

आदेश से घबराया मंदिर ट्रस्ट

धारी देवी मंदिर की अपलिफ्टिंग को लेकर अपनी पूर्ण स्वीकृति दे चुकी धारी देवी मंदिर समिति केंद्रीय वन एवं पर्यावरण मंत्रालय के निर्देश से घबरा गई है। गत वर्ष जुलाई के अंतिम सप्ताह तथा अगस्त माह में बरसात के समय डैम साइट में गेट लगे होने के कारण धारी देवी मंदिर परिसर में झील बन गई थी। झील बन जाने के कारण श्रद्धालुओं को मंदिर में दर्शनों के लिए पहुंचना मुश्किल हो गया था। मंदिर समिति की शनिवार को देर शाम इस मामले में बैठक शुरू हो गई है, जिस पर मंदिर की सुरक्षा के लिए क्या उपाय किए जाएं, इस पर चर्चा की जाएगी। जीवीके ने अब डैम साइट पर सभी आठ गेट बंद कर दिए हैं, इससे बरसात के समय खतरा और अधिक बढ़ [sic] जाएगा।

मंदिर को अपलिफ्ट करना ही होगा

बीते बरसात माह में परियोजना के गेट बंद रहने से धारी गांव का पुल बह गया और मंदिर परिसर जलमग्न हो गया। इसलिए बरसात से पहले किसी तरह मंदिर को तो अपलिफ्ट करना ही होगा। – विश्वेश्वर प्रसाद पांडे, अध्यक्ष धारी देवी मंदिर ट्रस्ट। (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 12).

256 The danger scenario is underpinned by the argument of the absence of a flood barrier. "उन्होंने माना कि सुरक्षा दीवार न होने के कारण बरसात में मंदिर के लिए खतरा है। इसलिए धारी देवी की मूर्ति बचाने के लिए शिफ्टिंग के अलावा कोई विकल्प नहीं है।" (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 15). "He [District magistrate Chandresh Yadav] believed that the lack of a protective wall would pose a threat to the temple during the rainy season. Therefore, there was no alternative but to move the statue to save it."

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Temple Trust anxious due to the directive

The Dhārī Devī Temple Committee, which already gave its full approval to the elevation of the Dhārī Devī Temple, is worried by the directions of the central Ministry of Forest and Environment. Last year in the rainy season, during the last week of July and in the month of August, because the gates had been fixed at the dam site, the surroundings of the Dhārī Devī Temple turned into a lake. As a result of the formation of the lake, it was difficult for the devotees to reach the temple for *darśan*. The temple committee started a meeting on this matter late on Saturday, it will be discussed which measures should be taken to protect the temple. GVK has now closed all eight gates on the dam site, this will further increase the risk during the rainy season.

The temple must be raised

Due to the closure of the project gate in the last rainy season, the bridge of Dhari village was washed away and the temple complex was submerged. Therefore, the temple has to be lifted up somehow before the rainy season—Vishweshwar Prasad Pandey, Chairman Dhārī Devī Temple Trust.

Although these excerpts contain allusions to the assumed reasons for the flooding of the temple surroundings last year (the closed gates), the temple trust and its chairman nevertheless do not challenge the legitimacy of this condition. Instead of considering opening the gates as a viable solution to minimise the danger of flooding, they only view moving the Goddess to the platform as a way out of the risk situation. It remains to speculate why the temple trust, so insistent at this point on carrying out the resettlement with high urgency before the monsoon season, recommends about one month later that the same task be postponed until right in the middle of the rainy season.

Eventually, the GVK itself reiterated the risk of a 2012 type of flood scenario as an argument during a crucial hearing at the Supreme Court. This had been scheduled to review or challenge the MoEF's work ban. Given that the company is thought to have contributed to the catastrophic effects of last year's floods, its reasoning becomes very peculiar.

कंपनी ने अदालत को यह भी बताया कि जून में मानसून सीजन शुरू होने वाला है। बांध का निर्माण लगभग पूरा है। पिछले कुछ सालों की बाढ़ की स्थिति को देखते हुए अगर मंदिर को प्रतिस्थापित नहीं किया तो वह पानी में डूब जाएगा। (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 17).

The company also informed the court that in June the monsoon season will begin. The construction of the dam is almost complete. In view of the flood situation in recent years, if the temple is not relocated, it will be submerged in water.

This may have been one of the crucial arguments that tipped the scales and convinced the Supreme Court to support the moving of the temple, ultimately forcing the MoEF to withdraw its order of May 10 preventing the relocation of the temple.²⁵⁷ Directly after this hearing, on May 16, the MoEF declared its directive invalid and thereby the resumption of work on the new temple was officially granted (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 17; Basu 2013).

These episodes proved once again that although the floods of the previous year were at least partially identified as an artificially induced disaster, they were transformed into a purely natural disaster in the course of the discursive process that followed. Despite the critical voices that had commented on and exposed the reasons for the flood the year before, the dominance of certain actors who claimed interpretive sovereignty, enabled the survival of only this aspect of the flood narrative and the thus publicly negotiated flood knowledge. Frequent repetitions of this stated version further cemented the idea that it is the natural state of the Goddess to be threatened by floods—and that it is the agency and essence of the floods to endanger the sacred place. As an additional outcome of this interpretive development, the emerging possibility of a new flood against the backdrop of a perceived sequence of disasters was reformulated into a direct threat scenario for the temple. The extrapolated hazard scenario then unfolded its full impact by becoming a generally accepted explanatory model in view of the impending monsoon. As the exposition of these further developments has clearly shown, the interpretations of the 2012 flood and the flood narratives thus circulating have significantly influenced ensuing events and the measures taken to deal with a perceived risk situation.

What also becomes visible is that already established and successfully applied practices of instrumentalising a flood were presumably perpetuated in coping with the disaster in 2013. On June 14, the rains began (M. S. Shekhar et al. 2015). On June 16 in the afternoon, in view of the dramatically rising water level, it was decided that the statue had to be lifted onto the new platform immediately. As per the *pūjārīs*, the statue was shifted at 6:30 p.m. (Gusain 2013a/b). Whether the masses of water would also have affected the temple if there had been no dam or if the gates of the dam had been open from the beginning is difficult to determine.

257 Of course, there were a variety of reasons for the Supreme Court's decision. The government of Uttarakhand, for example, also strongly supported the completion of the project.

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The sheer volume and force of the water was certainly too overwhelming to be anticipated even by the dam construction company. They themselves suffered great damage on the construction site. Strangely though, shortly after the Goddess had been brought to the platform, the gates of the dam were opened. According to witnesses, it happened at 3 a.m. on June 17 (Upadhvav 2013)²⁵⁸ and this measure led to another catastrophe as the force of the flash flood so unleashed swept across the lower parts of Srinagar town (Figure 13).²⁵⁹ As in 2012, allegations were levelled that the company officials had waited for the most opportune time to open the gates.

Taking advantage of this situation some representatives of GVK conspired to uplift the Dhari Devi temple, an act which for astrological reasons was proposed to be done in August 2013. In the meanwhile the gates of the dam which were earlier half open were completely closed which lead to increase in water level of dam's lake. The local administration and the district magistrate was then informed of the possible drowning of Dhari Devi temple which can lead to serious social unrest. In the above circumstances the Dhari Devi temple was lifted without any traditional, astrological or proper procedure. Due to incessant rain and cloud burst in Kedarnath, the water level of the lake kept rising continuously and started putting pressure on the dam and to prevent the dam from breaking, GVK opened the doors of the dam without any adequate warning because the reservoir water flowed down with all force and also washed away the "muck" deposited by GVK on three banks of the river. This increased the destructive power of the river. (Srinagar Bandh Aapada Sangharsh Samiti 2013)

Since only the upstream flood events with effects on the temple are of interest here, this study will not further investigate the exact circumstances of the deluge in the city of Srinagar. That the quotation is part of material collected for presentation in court reveals already that official investigations and legal proceedings took place later on. Interestingly, the extract from a letter of the Srinagar Bandh Aapada

258 The second major event, the dam burst at Kedarnath, occurred shortly after 6:15 a.m. on 17 June, according to some scientists who were present at the Chorabari Tal (lake) site (Menon 2013).

259 However, it was not only the strength of the water, but also the masses of muck in its tow that were earlier and illegally deposited at the dam site, which led to the catastrophic impact of this part of the flood.



Figure 13. The destroyed Shastra Seema Bal Training Academy in Srinagar became one of the iconic Pictures of the 2013 Flood Disaster (Upadhyay 2013).

Sangharsh Samiti²⁶⁰ to various ministers and administrative authorities in Uttarakhand and Delhi also mentions the importance of astrological constellations and, as a final result of the sudden and disaster-induced actions, the complete ignorance of all prescriptions and rites related to the relocation of a temple and statue of a deity. Different from earlier reports (see Amar Ujālā 2013, May 12), here the allegation is set up that the dam gates were closed even in view of a developing water-logging situation (see also Basu 2014). Evidence like this suggests that company officials may have deliberately allowed the water to accumulate and then bided their time until the transfer of the statue was enforced and completed. There are other statements from witnesses that support this here emerging reading of a “flood in a flood.”²⁶¹ If the veracity of these allegations were to prove true, it would imply

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261 Here is a further reference, albeit a very biased one, to this opinion as reported by Zee News. “As per conspiracy theorists, AHPCL officials artificially raised the water level in the dam so as to hasten the process of shifting of the Dhari Devi temple. Armed with all gear, the officials arrived at the temple site at 7.30 p.m. on Sunday (June 16) and cut off

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that the dam construction company not only drew on previously acquired flood knowledge, but above all on the experience of the 2012 flood. Then the obtained expertise formed the basis for their direct action in the event of a rising river level in 2013. And this would further mean that, albeit largely unnoticed in the prevailing chaos that accompanied the major catastrophe in 2013, a “micro disaster” unfolded in parallel in the shape of a multifaceted, artificially generated flood.

At the beginning of 2013, in an attempt to finalise the economic venture, the company became more and more entangled in a web of religious demands and meanings that hampered the swift relocation of the temple. Those were the only obstacles still standing in its way. Floods at this point seemed to provide the only way out of this stuck situation. This included both—on a political and legal level in the form of arguments fed by modified memories of a previous flood, or finally in the form of a disaster of unprecedented dimensions brought about by the impending flood. Floods acted as a catalyst, adopting connotations of movement, progress or even breakthrough. Thus, while in the pre-disaster period and until the onset of the calamitous events in 2013 the Goddess posed as an obstacle, the flood’s role and agency was to bring about change. But probably this functional aspect was again accompanied by considerable instrumentalisation and bore the hallmarks of an anthropogenic intervention in the context of a natural phenomenon.

the idol from its base” (Zee News 2013, July 2). Another statement with allegations that it was an “artificial flood” appears on the website of the South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers and People. “*Sohanlal Shah*, protagonist of ASMMDS [Adhya Shakti Ma Maiti Devi Samiti] alleged that SHEP staffs deliberately kept the gates of dam closed to create the scene of artificial floods on 16 of June 2013” (B.S. Rawat 2015). The Internet portal “The Wire” also contributed a quote from the convener of the social organisation Matu Jan Sangathan, Vimal Bhai, who supported the flood victims in asserting their claims. “He [Vimal] said that the 2013 floods were caused by human error. “Dam work had not been completed. They had closed the dam gates so that the Dhari Devi temple upstream gets submerged. It was an emotive issue which was also in court. The company took advantage of the rains and rising water level to say that the Dhari Devi was getting submerged. After the deity was relocated, they opened the gates and the silt mixed with water rushed down and this caused the flooding” (Bhatnagar 2017).

5.2 Dhārī Devī's Wrath and the Kedarnath Disaster— How Local is a Local Narrative?

उत्तराखंड में आई आपदा पर अभी पूरी तरह राहत कार्य शुरू भी नहीं हो पाए थे कि गढ़वाल में एक संयोग ने लोगों की धार्मिक भावनाओं को भड़का दिया है। उत्तराखंड में हुई तबाही के लिए जहां लोग प्रशासन की लापरवाही को जिम्मेदार ठहरा रहे हैं वहीं उत्तराखंड के गढ़वाल वासियों का मानना है कि माता धारी देवी के प्रकोप से ये महाविनाश हुआ। मां काली का रूप मानी जाने वाली धारी देवी की प्रतिमा को 16 जून की शाम को उनके प्राचीन मंदिर से हटाया गया था। उत्तराखंड के श्रीनगर में हाइड्रिल पॉवर प्रोजेक्ट के लिए ऐसा किया गया था। प्रतिमा जैसे ही हटाई गई उसके कुछ घंटे बाद ही केदारनाथ में तबाही का मंजर आया और सैकड़ों लोग इस तबाही में मारे गए। (Nigam 2013; Gusain 2013b)

The relief work for the disaster that hit Uttarakhand was not yet fully underway when a coincidence in Garhwal provoked the religious sentiments of the people. The people here are blaming the negligence of the administration for the destruction of Uttarakhand and the same residents of Garhwal in Uttarakhand, believe that the great disaster occurred due to the wrath of Mātā Dhārī Devī. The statue of Dhārī Devī, considered a form of Mā Kālī, was removed from the ancient temple on the evening of June 16. This was done for a hydel power project in Srinagar, Uttarakhand. Just a few hours after the statue was removed, scenes of destruction occurred in Kedarnath and hundreds of people were killed in this catastrophe.

This chapter now turns to the discursive processes in the wake of the last and most decisive deluge with regard to the Goddess's transformations, the flood catastrophe of 2013. According to the purported conviction of the local population the deity, enraged about the sudden removal from her earlier temple, had been responsible for the lake outburst flood²⁶² as well as its disastrous consequences in Kedarnath.

262 The event is categorised as a Lake Outburst Flood and demarcated to a Glacial Lake Outburst Flood (GLOF), because the lake is fed by snow and not by the water of the Chorabari Glacier. Nevertheless, the level of destruction that unfolded when the overflowing lake, which had no natural outlet, broke its moraine barrier resembles that caused by GLOFs (Menon 2013).

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In the phase following the catastrophe of 2013, the quality and scope of the discourse on the deity radically shifted. The theme of the Goddess and the restructuring of her temple became an issue of national significance in several aspects. With this qualitative change in the discourse and its participants as well as its leading actors, the framework under which this topic is addressed is also changing. While the earlier chapters were more broadly positioned in areas such as political ecology, this part now moves more explicitly into the field of disaster research and within this scope focuses on media analysis. Starting from the recognition of this altered setting, and in order to understand the significance of the Goddess in the flood and the attributions of divine vengeance, the first necessity was to identify the predominant agents and their respective interconnections that exerted their influence on the interpretation of the catastrophe. Those prevailing actors and actants were:

1. The media. The occurrence of this particular major disaster in the mountains immediately triggered the attention of the nationwide media, which raised this discourse to a national level. This discourse was determined by national players and their respective interests.
2. Previous activists. Actors who were already involved in the struggle for the Goddess beforehand and who stood for specific agendas, assumed a prominent position in this particular reading of the catastrophe.
3. The sacralised space or Uttarakhand's special position as a religiously attributed region. The state's exclusive status renders it not solely an array of local spaces, but simultaneously a space of national interest. These existing spaces merged into an entangled and inextricable web during the interpretation of the flood.

Despite the presence of the other actors, it was in any case the media that played the most central role in knowledge production after the flood event. Already the sweeping designation of the flood as *daivya āpadā*,²⁶³ a divine disaster, shows the particular framing of this catastrophe in the various media channels and thus suggests that the flood was induced by divine agency. As becomes explicit at this point, the media and their special mechanisms of operation in the event of a disaster clearly takes centre stage in this section (see Chapter 5.2.1).

The media discourse convincingly presents the myth of Dhārī Devī's revenge as a local version of a disaster reading in the aftermath of the catastrophe. Identifying a local perspective on such a disastrous event would be in fact interesting for research dealing with the understanding of a catastrophe. Yet the specific

263 I found several variations of spelling for this term: *daivya āpadā*, *daivī āpadā*, *daivīya āpadā*.

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conditions in this case seem to make the idea of deriving a local culture of dealing with and interpreting disasters problematic. Since the narrative of divine vengeance is, nevertheless, treated in public discourse as a regionally delimited interpretation of the catastrophe, the key question was posed: Can the given flood myth actually be understood as a token—and if so, to what extent—of local knowledge production with regard to a flood disaster? The argument here is that this divine narrative, although to a certain extent created at the local level, is not a local narrative in its most traditional sense. It was rather a product of various interests, ideas about a sacred space, the local conditions at the time of the catastrophe and the overwhelming influence of the media form of presentation. These factors involved, presumably in a feedback effect, in turn influenced perceptions at the local level and led to the formation of a state and nationwide narrative of divine vengeance. The narrative of Dhārī Devī's rage, rather than representing a local way of coping with a disaster, would thus have to be regarded as the product of a mass media culture in which people are exposed to “[. . .] images and stereotypes produced by globalized communication media” (Hoffman & Gardner 2006:11). To address this question, the investigation traces the putative origins of the narrative of Dhārī Devī's wrath, considers the influence of the several actors that determined its creation, and likewise the wider mechanisms that turned it into a flood myth absorbed on a national scale. Based on the premise that ideas from the local level and external notions about the local culture are inextricably mixed in this discussion, the analysis also attempts to sketch the meaning of a local identity and asks how narrowly the boundary of the local is to be drawn in pursuit of a local narrative.

5.2.1 Disaster and the Media

Floods, like other natural disasters, routinely result in massive media coverage, and for most people the news media is the primary source of information about disasters (Goltz 1984; Sikka 2001). In addition to the print media and TV news channels including their internet representation, the media landscape today is defined by the diverse involvement of social media. The demand for immediate and comprehensive information causes the use of social media to increase almost instantaneously in the event of a disaster (Haddow/Haddow 2014). The digital media have thus largely diversified the disaster discourse (see Cheong 2012).²⁶⁴ This section describes in more detail the mechanisms that take effect at the level of the media discourse in the event of a catastrophe.

264 For studies investigating the role of social media in the event of a disaster, see Tim et al. 2017; Haddow & Haddow 2014; Cheong 2012.

During times of disaster, the media have been certified an agenda-setting ability (Giri & Vats 2018) and their significant implications for the perception and response to a disaster are widely recognised (Nair 2010:36). Media coverage, including social media, of natural disasters thereby not only reflects the coping and adaptation strategies of the afflicted societies and institutional responses, but also mirrors and informs public opinion and understanding as well as learning processes (Choudhury & Emdad Haque 2018). “These roles qualify news media to be considered a catalyst that captures post-disaster opportunities for some ‘forward looking’ changes, triggered by natural disasters” (Choudhury & Emdad Haque 2018:237). One can distinguish between two central roles of the media in the event of a disaster. The first is their potential function as a decisive communication tool during a catastrophe. In this way they are part of the disaster response process.²⁶⁵ For the further course of this study the second point is of greater importance, namely the role of the media as a tool for the follow-up of a cataclysm. This is where the media can serve as an instrument for future disaster management. Yet they not only offer explanations for natural phenomena, but also contribute to the cultural representation of catastrophes (Döring 2003).

The various media are valuable sources of information on the one hand, while on the other hand their way of transmitting information also harbours many pitfalls. This makes them a contentious cooperation partner in disaster management.²⁶⁶ First, there is no direct control over the content and form of the disseminated items of information (Nair 2010). Second, the media are to some extent restricted not only in their ability to convey information, but also in their determination to communicate contents comprehensively. Limitations result from the media’s general criteria for the selection of news items that fall under sociostructural or media-organisational factors. Those have been identified as immediacy, proximity, prominence, unusualness, conflict and relevance (Tautz 2006). The list also embraces, and problematically so, the media’s short-lived attention span, which leads to a story quickly becoming obsolete, so that it is discarded for the next “breaking

265 “They have certain characteristics that make them advantageous for disaster communication: They provide easy access to large publics and some of them constitute a robust communication system which remains working even in cases of a partial breakdown of the infrastructure (battery-powered radio)” (Nair 2010:36). In this respect, the media are also regarded as a means for policy-makers and disaster managers, who are supposed to collaborate with the media in case of a disaster, or during its successive phase of disaster management (see Giri & Vats 2018).

266 The media are seen as both problematic and beneficial in the context of disaster management (Sood et al. 1987). On the one hand, the presence of the media may act as a source of disruption and divert additional resources, such as time, from disaster management. At the same time, the reporting, even if it is sensationalistic, generates attention and a willingness among the public to join in disaster relief and, not least, to provide financial support.

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story” (see Button 2002; Döring 2003). Other factors are the missing expertise of journalists in view of scientific background knowledge, or their position as “gate keepers, interpreters and commentators” of the news items. Yet, it is not solely the journalists or the media who set the news criteria, but the demand of the audience significantly influences the selection of news (Nair 2010).

A disaster is not a short lived and onetime event but an ongoing process. Research identified three general phases of a disaster (see Rahul 2009; Nair 2010).²⁶⁷ In terms of news coverage, a disaster’s first phase is mainly characterised by information shortages,²⁶⁸ or a “newshole” (Sood et al. 1987), which is only later replaced by a news surplus. While the first phase of the disaster is marked by the absence of information, simultaneously a high demand for information emerges (ibid. 1987). The ensuing phase is illustrated as a situation of “open gates” (Sood et al. 1987:32), which means an overwhelming amount of news pieces is available at the same time and all with potential news value. Sometimes, however, news shortages may still persist due to various circumstances, and if news personnel cannot meet the increased demand for disaster news, they will resort to information obtained directly from members of the public (ibid. 1987).

In the event of a disaster, some additional considerations for the story’s news priority come into place. Sood et al. (1987:37) name the following parameters, which also exerted decisive influence during the Uttarakhand disaster:

- Severity of the disaster,
- Identity and origin of its victims,
- Geographic distance from power centers,
- Perceived audience interest in the disaster’s location and hazard agent,
- The convenience factor—how easy, or difficult is it to cover the story.

Sood et al. (1987:37) propose that 33 percent of the variance in the number of reports on a disaster can be attributed to a country’s popularity as a tourist destination. If this observation were to be applied to the importance of the state of Garhwal for domestic tourism, the coverage of the disaster would have been particularly emphasised due to the high death toll among people from the Indian plains. There was indeed evidence to suggest that the post-disaster focus was less on the residents and more on the tourists, as reflected, for example, in the implementation of relief measures (Gusain & Datt 2013).

267 In terms of disaster management, it covers the following three domains: “Disaster prevention (before), acute disaster situation (during), disaster coping (after)” (Nair 2010:40).

268 However, it should be noted that in the event of a disaster, the overall productivity of news agencies in the first stage tends to decline due to the resulting adverse conditions (Sood et al. 1987).

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The post-disaster period is considered the crucial phase for the interpretation of the catastrophe. While it is obviously the media that frames the event, it is actually people who have access to the media that are in a position to shape its perception (Goltz 1984). In the struggle for interpretive sovereignty after the catastrophe, individuals with an affinity for the media thus assume a dominant role (see Button 2002). Often these are people who have a special celebrity status (Alexander 2015). There is nevertheless also a well-established relationship between journalists and officials and the journalists rely largely on officials for information (Button 2002; also Sood et al. 1987:34; Goltz 1984). The sought-for source of the media is also referred to as the “information czar” (as cited in Sood et al. 1987:35). It is “a person with official status and relevant expertise to convey the most credible, authoritative EPI [emergency public information] available and to interpret and clarify complexity for the general reporter” (1987:35). What is therefore presented is the official view of the disaster (Sood et al. 1987). This is the version, that will leave the deepest imprint on people’s understanding and memory of a disaster.²⁶⁹

5.2.2 The Narrative of Divine Intervention— a Qualitative Assessment

The India-wide interest in the Uttarakhand flood is high, primarily because thousands of people from all over the country were physically affected by the disaster. The sensational images of an apocalyptic catastrophe and its victims nevertheless also grabbed the attention of an unaffected nation-wide public. While disaster stories tend to generate a high level of public interest from the outset (Sood et al. 1987), this attention was heightened by the special sacred meaning accorded to the state of Uttarakhand. The magnitude of the Uttarakhand disaster led to a shift in coverage and thus interpretive authority into the hands of the national print and audio-visual media. The observed shift was not only from the local to the national level, but also to a large degree from print to visual media as well as social media. Prior to the disaster, the issue of the Dhārī Devī and Srinagar Dam had received rather little attention from the national news channels, although the protest of the *sādhus* and Sādhvī Uma Bharti had generated some awareness. Most of the reporting at that time however came from the local or state press. After the disaster these positions changed. The national media outlets in part created and in part jumped onto the narrative of

269 These earlier observations can still be considered largely valid, although several authors point to a weakening of authority and consequently authority over information with the advent of the internet and social media. Their argument is that “the authority of leaders diminishes when a medium allows different people to have open access and gain greater control over knowledge and social information” (Cheong 2012:72).

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the flood and its alleged cause—the relocation of the statue of Dhārī Devī. The local newspapers, on the other hand, concentrated more on reporting all the damage, suffering and down-to-earth problems caused by the flood in the region.

The articles and news channels that engage with the narrative of a metaphysical connection between two events do not usually focus homogeneously on ideas of a divine wrath as the sole explanation for the disaster. Several discourses can be discerned unfolding simultaneously at this stage. They cover issues such as the ecological impact of dam projects as potential triggers, the rampant construction and unplanned development, the mushrooming of tourism etc. Another discursive strand constitutes the heroic role of the army, after state authorities largely failed with their disaster response. Giri and Vats (2018) ascertained that the quality of the news reporting on the Uttarakhand disaster was mainly driven by a focus on sensationalism, while other topics in relation to disaster preparedness, mitigation, or redevelopment were mostly missing. In particular, the English-language media, which dealt with the topic Dhārī Devī/Kedarnath, address a dichotomy between modern sciences and faith. They postulate that there is a scientific explanation for the catastrophe in Uttarakhand and treat the religious discourse rather as a curious deviation from this suggested valid understanding. Having clarified that they regard the matter against the backdrop of a rational worldview, thereby maintaining their integrity and respectability, the same sources then discuss at length the “unscientific” mythological issue. The practice of the Hindi sources is comparable; they too mention at least in the introduction some alternative explanations to that of the Goddess's wrath. To begin with here are three typical openers of those articles illustrating the contradicting approaches towards the catastrophe, or the collision of different knowledge systems.

हालांकि विज्ञान के इस युग में इस तर्क से सहमत नहीं हुआ जा सकता फिर भी स्थानीय लोगों का मानना है कि धारी माता मंदिर विस्थापन की वजह से ही यह तबाही आई। (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4)

Although in this era of science, one cannot agree with this argument, yet the local people believe that this devastation occurred due to the relocation of the Dhārī Mata Temple.

विज्ञान इस विनाशलीला के पीछे कुदरत के कहर को मानता है जबकि यहां के लोग इस विनाशलीला के पीछे धारी देवी की प्रतिमा के साथ छेड़छाड़ को बता रहे हैं। (Zee News 2013, June 27)

Science thinks that behind this huge calamity is the destruction of nature, while the people here say that behind this catastrophe is the tampering with the statue of Dhārī Devī.

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विज्ञान भले ही इसे माने या ना माने लेकिन धर्म के जानकारों का यह ही विश्वास है कि दैविय सत्ता को चुनौती देना खुद के अस्तित्व को मिटाने जैसा है जिसकी बानगी उत्तराखंड में देखने को मिली। (P7 News Channel 2013, July 9).

Whether science acknowledges it or not, but the experts of religion believe that challenging the divine power is like erasing one's own existence, the hallmark of which can be seen in Uttarakhand.

The Mail Today (2013, June 27), a joint venture with the UK's Daily Mail, adopts a didactic tone to directly address the perceived metaphysical phenomenon from the perspective of scientific knowledge. The newspaper features the explanations of alleged experts on transcendental phenomena in this context by interviewing two scholars from Delhi on the Dhārī Devī-Kedarnath narrative. For sociologist Professor Anand Kumar of Jawaharlal Nehru University, the temporal concordance between the Kedarnath lake outburst flood and the moving of the statue was "mere coincidence." Then there is the opinion of an Islamic expert. Professor Akhtar-ul Wasey, director of Zakir Hussain Institute of Islamic Studies at Jamia Millia Islamia, agrees with his colleague and attributes the disaster to anthropogenic causes. The mythological view he puts down instead to people's private choice, saying:

'The most important thing to remember is the treatment meted out to the hills and nature. This had to happen. Beliefs have their own place and those who believe in them can stick with them. But this was a disaster in the making.' (Mail Today 2013, June 27)

The theme of science and faith also turns to the discussion of belief questions using scientific reasoning (cf. Chapter 3.4). In a scientific guise but from the theological side of the spectrum, the national Hindi language channel Zee News (2013, July 1) aired a special program explicitly identifying the "religious and divine reasons of the disaster in Uttarakhand." The program not only analyses in depth the connection of Dhārī Devī to Kedarnath, but with two renowned astrologers via live link discusses also other eligible metaphysical reasons for the catastrophe in the high mountain region. The debating astrologers Vaibhava Nath Sharma and Kirat Bhai²⁷⁰ agree that the deluge not only happened because of the Goddess's

270 Here an extract from the astrologer's website: "[. . .] a divine embodiment of Love, Truth and Beauty, appeared amidst us on 21st of July, 1962 in Porbunder (Gujarat). Today, he is known to the world as Parampujya Kirit Bhaiji. Gurudev's discourses provide spiritual

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anger. According to them, it was also because the pandits in charge at Kedarnath missed the *śubh muhūrt*, the right and auspicious date to open the gates of the pilgrimage destinations, the Gangotri and Yamunotri Dhām. The respective pandits had allegedly with “great ignorance” opened the gates for the 2013 season at a moment which the astrologers deemed highly inappropriate. They elaborate that it was a time “in which the sacred task and the worship of God are prohibited,” and on top during an (astrological) conjunction “which is unsuitable for the worship of the deities.”²⁷¹ The astrologer Vaibhava Nath Sharma even places this astrological lapse above the relocation of Dhārī's statue in its significance for the disaster:

महादेव के क्षेत्र में धर्म कार्य में हुए इस व्यतिक्रम को एक दैवीय आपदा का प्रमुख कारण माना जा रहा है। केदारनाथ में तबाही का दूसरा बड़ा कारण देवी का प्रकोप [. . .] (Zee News 2013, July 1).

This deviation from the religious ceremonial in the domain of the Mahadev is believed to be the main cause for a divine disaster. The second major reason of the catastrophic destruction in Kedarnath is the wrath of the Goddess [. . .].

An online portal (OneIndia) speaks up with a critical voice and provides some introspection on the post-disaster media and communication process.²⁷² Author Naveen Nigam (2013) explores the dynamics of how the idea of Goddess Dhārī's involvement in Kedarnath emerged and was disseminated across the country. He describes how what also he calls a “coincidence” provoked the religious

succour and nourishment to all the seekers. Embellished with references, anectotes [*sic*] and analogies drawn from our ancient scriptures, sua ca—The Upanishads, Vedas, Shrimad Bhagvatam, Bhagvat Geeta and the Ramayana-Gurudev's ‘pravachans’ are like nectarean drink, served to parched souls” (Kirit ‘Bhai Ji’ 2005:V).

271 “[. . .] चतुर्थी आरंभ हो रही थी जो रिक्त तिथि है साथ ही पित्र [*sic*] पूजन का योग आरंभ हो रहा था, जिसमें पवित्र कार्य और देवपूजा निषेध है, यह देवताओं की पूजा न करने का योग है, [. . .]” (Zee News 2013, July 1). “*Chaturthi* had started, which is a *rikta tithi* [a particular astrologically inauspicious time], at the same time had begun the occasion of *pitr pūjan*, during which auspicious tasks and the worship of gods is forbidden, this is an occasion where the worship of the gods should not be performed [. . .].”

272 One more author, Pratik Shekhar, comments on the inconsistencies found in the media process, saying “[. . .] इस चर्चा के बाद स्थानीय समाचार पत्र व सोशल साइट्स सक्रिय हो गईं और इस मुद्दे पर तर्क वितर्क सामने आने लगे।” (Shekhar 2013). “[. . .] after this discussion local newspapers and social networking sites became active and the wrangling over this issue began to thrive.” In spite of the author's critical stance and the fact that he holds the local media and social media responsible for the spread of the story, he nevertheless implies that some metaphysical agency was involved in the Kedarnath disaster.

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sentiments of the people (see the quotation at the beginning of Chapter 5.2). On the one hand, as he puts it, the regional community holds the negligence of the administration responsible for the devastation of Uttarakhand, while on the other hand, they say it happened because of Mata Dhārī Devī's wrath. By this account, a media channel (thereby probably meaning the Zee News group) picked up this "mythological perception" and circulated it throughout the country, where it "spread like a wildfire" (Nigam 2013). Nigam admits that this channel also mentioned the "coincidental" nature of the event when publishing the narrative.²⁷³ The journalist, therefore, does not regard the media as solely responsible for the successful dissemination of this disaster reading, but rather criticises the willingness of the recipients, the Indian public, to accept any such topic connected to their belief. "[. . .] यह हर कोई जानता है कि आस्था के इस देश में ऐसी कोई बात लोग बड़ी आसानी से ग्रहण कर लेते हैं।" (Nigam 2013). "But everybody knows that people in this land of faith pick up such a thing very easily." While implicitly criticising the average Indian with his undifferentiated attitude towards faith-based statements, he also unmasks the general inconsistency accompanying the explanations for the flood. A key point here would be that the local priests said they did everything they could to save the statue from the floods, yet then the removal of the statue was blamed for the disaster.

देवी की मूर्ति अब मामला यह है कि देवी की मूर्ति को इसलिए हटाया गया कि वह कहीं बाढ़ में डूब न जाए लेकिन अब इस बात का प्रचार किया जा रहा है कि मूर्ति को हटाने से प्रलय आई। जबकि मंदिर कमेटी ने साफ कर दिया है कि 16 जून को मूर्ति को भंयकर बारिश की सूचना के बाद हटाया गया था। (Nigam 2013)

The case of the statue of the Goddess is such, that the statue of the Goddess was removed so that she would not be submerged somewhere along the flood, but now it is propagated that the catastrophe occurred due to the removal of the idol—while the

273 "इस संयोग से पूरे गढ़वाल में रोष व्याप्त है लेकिन इसी बीच एक राष्ट्रीय चैनल ने इस खबर को चलाकर और उस पर बहस दिखाकर अब इस बात को गढ़वाल ही नहीं पूरे भारत में आग की तरह फैला दिया है कि धारी देवी की मूर्ति हटाने से ही पूरे उत्तराखंड में तबाही मची। वैसे तो चैनल बराबर यह कहता कहा कि यह मात्र एक संयोग हो सकता है लेकिन यह हर कोई जानता है कि आस्था के इस देश में ऐसी कोई बात लोग बड़ी आसानी से ग्रहण कर लेते हैं।" (Nigam 2013). "Due to this coincidence, there is outrage all over Garhwal; but in the meantime, a national channel has circulated and debated the news, now it is spreading like wildfire not only in Garhwal, but all over India that Uttarakhand was affected by this destruction only because of the removal of the idol of Dhārī Devī. Besides, the channel likewise said that this may just be a coincidence, but everybody knows that people in this land of faith pick up such a thing very easily."

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temple committee made it clear that on June 16, the statue had been removed after the notification of the terrifying rain.²⁷⁴

The contradiction raised here between the situation prevailing on the ground and the later interpretation of the disaster is addressed in more detail in the chapter after next.

5.2.3 The Mythological Ornamentation

This part examines how the media and subsequently different online commentators and bloggers presented the Dhārī Devī case. The focus will be on examining the ways the Goddess, her history and the story of her connection to Kedarnath have been embellished in order to paint a comprehensive picture of a significant and powerful “superior Goddess.”

With the aim of enhancing her importance, the Goddess had been endowed with new, expanded or inflated qualities during the media and public discourse. Reports in this regard regularly emphasise Dhārī Devī's identity as the protector of the Char Dhām—Kedarnath, Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri, as well as her role as patron of the *yātrā* (pilgrimage) to these places and of its pilgrims.²⁷⁵ She likewise became the guardian deity of the whole of Uttarakhand (Hindustan Times 2013, June 26; Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4²⁷⁶). The description of her as the *kuldevī* of the area is probably the closest to the local imagination (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4).²⁷⁷ In addition, the statue is portrayed as alive and awake (Webdunia 2013, June 24),²⁷⁸ indicating her animate nature and her origin story is repeated many times and takes multiple forms.²⁷⁹ The connections drawn between her name

274 See more on the temple committees' stance in Subchapter 5.2.4.

275 Dattopadhye 2013; Gusain 2013b (video); Zee News 2013, July 9; Mail Today 2013, June 27; Hindustan Times 2013, June 26; Webdunia 2013, June 22.

276 “परंपरागत रूप से माना जाता है कि धारी माता, चारों धाम की यात्रा करने वाले श्रद्धालुओं और उत्तराखण्ड की जनता की रक्षक माता हैं।” (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4). “It is traditionally believed that Dhārī Mata is the protector of the devotees visiting the four *dhām* and the protector of the people of Uttarakhand.”

277 “धारी देवी इस क्षेत्र की कुलदेवी भी हैं जिन्हें गांव के लोग सदियों से पूजते आए हैं। पौराणिक मान्यता है कि पिछले 800 सालों से धारी देवी अलकनंदा नदी के बीच बैठकर नदी की धारा को काबू में रखती थीं।” (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4). “Dhārī Devī is also the *kuldevī* of this area, whom the villagers have worshipped for centuries. Legend has it that Dhārī Devī resided in the middle of the river Alaknanda for the last 800 years and kept the flow of the river under control” (similar: IBNlive 2013, June 27a).

278 “मूर्ति जाग्रत और साक्षात् है।” (Webdunia 2013, June 24).

279 “स्थानीय मान्यता के मुताबिक एक बार मंदिर में बाढ़ आ गई तो मूर्ति चल कर एक चट्टान पर आ गई और रोने लगी, जब ग्रामीणों ने मूर्ति का रोना सुना तो वे वहां पहुंचे तब दिव्य शक्ति ने उनसे उस जगह

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and her function as the regulator of the flow of the Alaknanda (Hindustan Times 2013, June 26) lend further significance to the occurrence of the disturbance of a cosmic order and its fatal consequences. A conviction of several sources that Dhārī comes from *dhār* (stream, flow, river) seems to be so clear to many Hindi-speakers, that they don't even question the etymology. As in the case of the commentary by astrologer Sanjay Rath (see 5.2.7.) and several others, she is even consistently addressed as Dhārā Devī (Inewslivenet 2013a/b; Gusain 2013b). The author Pratik Shekhar (2013) explains the name of the Goddess as coming from a Sanskrit root “*dhā*,” with meanings such as holding, having and placing and engages in a curious pun. “[. . .] धारी शब्द का मतलब ‘रखना’ होता है जबकि वहां से धारी देवी को हटा दिया गया। [. . .].” “[. . .] the word Dhārī means to keep, whereas Dhārī Devī was removed from there [. . .].” Apparently he wants to express that the name of the Goddess is “keep,” which excludes the possibility of moving her, since her name already implies that she must be kept where she is.

Records of the event of her resettlement often bear a resemblance to tales from the Purāṇas or the Mahābhārata. They are adorned with dramatising elements, such as the supposed occurrence of special weather phenomena, “Lightning flashed and a thunderstorm broke even as the idol was being moved . . .” (Mail Today 2013, June 27) or on Zee News: “Just when the idol was lifted there was lighting and heavy rains followed by the cloud burst in Kedarnath that has left thousands dead” (Zee News 2013, July 2). The Hindi examples in this regard are even more drastic, “देवी हटीं तो हिली देवभूमि” (Gusain 2013b: 08 : 30 min.). “The *devī* was removed, therefore the land of the Gods trembled.”

जब आसमान से बारिश कयामत बनकर गिरी, ग्लेशियर फटने लगे तो उफान मारती नदियों ने किसी को नहीं बरखा। गंगा के इस गुस्से से, इस रौद्र रूप से, इस क्रोध से भगवान भी अछूते नहीं रहे। (IBNlive 2013, June 27a).

When the rain fell from heavens and turned into the apocalypse, the glaciers began to burst and the flooded rivers spared no one. From this wrath of Gaṅgā, this form of Rudra, this rage, even God did not remain untouched.

A programme by Aaj Tak features a comic strip story about the immediate extreme weather phenomena that accompany or are in response to the removal of the statue (Figure 14).

पर मूर्ति स्थापित करने के लिए कहा” (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4). “According to local belief, the statue had moved once when the temple was flooded; It had arrived at a rock where it began crying. When the villagers heard the weeping idol, they reached there and the divine power asked them to install the statue at that place.”

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Figure 14. News Channel Aaj Tak's Portrayal of the Resettlement of Dhārī Devī (Source: Gusain 2013b, min.: 02:45, 02:49, 02:57).

The sequence of images seems to show some criminals trying to steal the statue and who are subsequently chased away by nature's violent response to their sinister intent. With a statue that bears not the slightest resemblance to the original, this representation is obviously intended to frame emotional conceptions concerning the event. This form of the representation however reflects how some media channels convey the message of Hindu feelings and conceptions as being violated in the disaster-affected state (see Chapter 5.2.7).

5.2.4 A Simulation of the Local

उत्तराखंड यानि देवभूमि, जहां की वादियों में धर्म और आस्था की हवा चलती है। यहां भक्ति भाव अंधविश्वास की हद तक लोगों की जिंदगी से जुड़ा है। यहां एक धारी देवी का मंदिर है। (IBNlive 2013, June 27a)

Uttarakhand means the land of the gods, where the wind of religion and faith blows through the valleys. Here, devotion is associated with people's life to the extent of superstition. Here is a temple of Dhārī Devī.

The "local" assumes great importance concerning the narrative of the Goddess Dhārī and her agency in Kedarnath. One striking feature of the reports about the Goddess and the disaster is how often the term "local" is mentioned in connection with the people of Uttarakhand. The national news services frequently feature reports on how the local population is dealing with the disaster or how the local people perceive the catastrophe. One of the results of the regional population coping with the disaster is alleged to be the creation of the myth that the deity caused the flood in Kedarnath. The following section will look at how the media discourse constructed an image of the local and local knowledge production that is

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demonstrably an artificial image and has more in common with the perception of the mountain region by people from the plains than with the self-understanding of the Garhwali population (see Chapter 3 for a more comprehensive elaboration on the binarity of the “local” and the “non-local” in the area).²⁸⁰

The idea of the “local” or of local identity is by itself quite vague, variable and depending on the frame of reference and thus requires some contextualisation. As Shao et al. (2017) point out, the ambiguity associated with the delimitation of a local identity is due to the absence of valid definitions, but is also caused by the “diversification of all the literature on different aspects of identity” (Shao et al. 2017). There is likewise no consensus on the scope of the territory to be investigated when approaching local identity. The key nature of local identity is specified as follows, “its uniqueness is derived from people’s daily interactions with the local place throughout time” (2017:038), while “a local actor can be defined as an individual or organisation with a capacity for intentional behaviour (agency), and with an identity founded in a particular locality” (High et al. 2004:2). In an analysis of the factors that determine local identity, Shao et al. identified four main constituents, which they termed “physical,” “social,” “sensory,” and “memory” (2017:035). Whereas the “physical” aspect points to the “interaction of humans and the physical environment,” the social angle focuses on the social activity thereby endowing a locality with a distinct place identity. The sensory aspect, in turn, consists of individual experiences and interactions that connect an individual to a place, which leads to many different experiences and imaginations surrounding the location. Memory is recognised as a crucial contributor to the formation of local identity. The memory component denotes the legacy from the past that is generated when a community lives in a place for a long time. The bond to a place is therefore not only based on the lively exchange with the environment, but also on the memory of this interaction. It is tied to important events and the repetition and transmission of stories pertaining to them. Narratives created in this way confer a locality its distinctive and universally recognised character. Individuals and groups inhabiting a place with the different shades and versions of their memories all contribute to its particular identity (ibid. 2017). Local identity has its own distinctive features in the South Asian context. A common understanding across much of the subcontinent is “that people and the places where they

280 Here a few more observations by Whitmore on notions of the local and non-local in Kedarnath. “*Local* is often used as a Hindi word, usually as an adjective, e.g. a local man (*ek local ādmī*). Non-locals in Kedarnath are generally those who come on *yatra*, [. . .] If their goals are explicitly nature oriented (trekking, sightseeing) rather than devotional, an assumption much easier to make if the non-locals in question are Westerners or Bengalis fitted out with trekking gear, then non-locals may be referred to as tourists (*pariyatak-log*) (Whitmore 2010:68f.).

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live are mutually determining” (Sax 2009:54). This concept is referred to by Sax as “shared mutual substance” (Sax 2009:54) and points to the multiple forms of exchange with the physical environment in which a society lives—such as with air, water and soil and their different cosmological attributions of meaning. A locality however is also subjected to constant interchange with the “outside world,” which continuously negotiates and informs local identities. Today’s intrusive and fast-paced interactions in particular are increasingly causing the dissolution of a “traditional” understanding of local identity and distinctiveness. This development unfolds against the backdrop of a heightened information exchange, but also because of the diffusion of global paradigms or global systems into local structures (see Harindranath 2006). Mergers that take place when “external pan-Indian and global paradigms” meet “local religious beliefs and practices” thereby lead to the emergence of “a new hybrid worldview” (Halperin 2012:4).²⁸¹

With regard to these reflections on local identity, it remains debatable how tightly the line of the “local” is to be drawn, or who should be included and who should be excluded as a representative of the local position in this case study. For example, interpretations from the immediate vicinity of the Goddess’s location often contradict views from the nearest city, Srinagar. Although the Goddess primarily belongs to the surrounding villages and is part of their daily practice, she is equally a goddess of a regionally wider circle of worshippers. Another factor, which affects narratives concerning the Goddess is that the attitude of the people at the very scene of the temple is known to have been influenced by distinct public relation campaigns of the company and the financial funds they distributed.²⁸² Even the local daily newspaper *Amar Ujālā*, the medium per se, which in Uttarakhand stands for proximity to the local population and for “local identity,” comes along with a certain degree of historical bias (see Chapter 2.4.1). These points on top of that raise the question of who is even sufficiently devoid of an interest position to represent an actual voice of the “local.” Such ambiguities and unanswered questions must consequently be kept in mind when analysing the media discourse dealing with the nature of the “local.”

The media involved in the interpretation of the Kedarnath disaster draws on a stereotypical picture of the local society and ascribes the emergence of the divine explanation of the catastrophe to purely local dynamics. They postulate an idealised state in which the local population is largely unaffected by the penetration of

281 This was an observation made by Halperin (2012) during his research in another part of the Western Himalayan region, the Kullu Valley in Himachal Pradesh.

282 Regarding this problem of bias through monetary factors, Antje Linkenbach (personal conversation March 2018, Dehra Dun) told me she used to give her students a particular advice to find valid ideas of the local population regarding the construction of hydroelectric power plants in the mountain zone. She asked them to interview people not from the directly affected villages, but from the villages further away from the project site, more precisely those ones, who did not receive any compensation.

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external forces, such as digitalisation, the superimposed imaginations of external actors, and above all the intrusion of themselves—the media. Such a scenario may have existed in these areas decades ago.²⁸³ Yet, what could be an expectable trajectory of an interpretive process that has a “local” character? Based on the introduced key concepts of local identity, a local narrative would emerge from the immediate interaction of the creator(s) with the environment. Since local identity consists of many divergent experiences, a narrative thus generated would most likely appear in multiple versions. Likewise, the fragmentation of local spaces would create many separate narratives across a region, each adapted to its unique local conditions. A disastrous event would be associated with other phenomena occurring in proximity to this location, or with meaning for the locality (see Halperin 2016).²⁸⁴ Contrary to such principles, the narrative of the Devī was an entirely homogenous story. It was supported by a large section of the population throughout India and was also widely adopted by the locals of most parts of Uttarakhand. However, already the geographical factor in terms of a distance of roughly 130 kilometres between Kedarnath and Dhārī Devī Temple would make a strong argument against a combination of the two places among the so-defined concept of the “local.” Another important reason against using Kedarnath as a point of reference for Dhārī Devī is that Kedarnath represents not even a major landmark for the people in the hills. Sax (2009) describes the holy Char Dhām sites as less relevant to the religious life of the local community—due to their status as “experientially distant” (Sax 2009:53). It is instead the local shrines that form the sacred landscape of the local population and determine their daily practice and everyday life. These

283 Here again, it should be noted that particularly the site of Dhārī Devī has always been subjected to more interaction with other regions due to its location at the pilgrimage path as compared to mountain areas more “off the track.”

284 Halperin (2016) explored local coping strategies during a drought and in the face of climate change in Himachal Pradesh. In spite of large-scale transformations in that area, it was still possible to single out rather “traditional” versions of narratives describing reasons for certain weather phenomena. These explanations exposed a local thinking characterised by spatial proximity. He writes, “the ritual mechanisms target solely local conditions, and no claims are made regarding any extra-local effects. The deities’ interventions tend to address specific, highly localized weather situations, indicating a meteorological logic that is quite different from the modern understanding of climate as a global system. In other words, weather conditions in the Kullu Valley are considered a local phenomenon, determined by regional deities and manipulated through place-based ritual actions performed by residents of the territory” (Halperin 2016:18). I made comparable observations during my earlier (media-) research in Himachal Pradesh. The causes of the drought mentioned in the newspaper and citing local informants, revolved around locally observable factors and in particular violations of rules and customs by the community. As an example, in the event of an invocation of a local deity the fact that the cows were not given enough grazing land was indicated as the cause of the lack of rain (see also Halperin 2016).

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reflections imply that the construct of the flood narrative comprising Dhārī Devī and Kedarnath in many aspects contradicts not only a general understanding of local dynamics, but also conflicts with cultural flow processes prevailing in the area. The narrative itself, by connecting the two distant places, is already an indicator for the extended conceptual scope of this society or the sources from which it originates. Thereby it refutes the image of the “local” supported by the media sources among its large-scale coverage.

The first example at the beginning of this chapter illustrated the media-transmitted concept of the local. The description of the events at the site of Dhārī Devī assume a mythological quality and the people of the state serve as extras in this constructed mythological tale. People are supposedly superstitious or “immersed in their faith:”

अब आस्था में डूबे सुमन नौटियाल जैसे स्थानीय लोग इस जल प्रलय को धारी देवी मंदिर से जोड़कर देख रहे हैं। (IBNlive 2013, June 27a)

Now local people like Suman Nautiyal, who are immersed in their faith, are seeing the flood in connection with the Dhārī Devī Temple.

The intro of an article of the Mail Today (2013, June 27) in this respect even takes an offensive tone in the description of the local village people: “Garhwal’s village folk, known for their childlike adherence to superstition [. . .].” Such articles then go into coupling the alleged characteristics and traditions of the local population with the story about Dhārī Devī. Many news items do not even attach any further attributes to the population, but only clarify that it is the mountain people’s deep-rooted belief and their traditions, which gave rise to the narrative. “Locals believe moving Dhari Devi idol from Alaknanda after 800 years caused the cloudburst. [. . .]. In the hills, tales of nature’s fury are a part folklore and a part faith” (IBNlive 2013, June 27b). Similarly, Aaj Tak claims that “उत्तराखंड के गढ़वाल वासियों का मानना है कि माता धारी देवी के प्रकोप से ये महाविनाश हुआ” (Gusain 2013b). “The residents of Garhwal in Uttarakhand believe that this devastation was due to the wrath of Mother Dhārī Devī.” Examples already mentioned in the last chapter (see Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4; Zee News 2013, June 27) to illustrate the dichotomy of faith and scientific knowledge would also serve in this section to contrast scientific knowledge with “local knowledge,” and in this context local knowledge is presented as largely inferior.²⁸⁵ The homogenous form of picturing the local

285 A further example: “विज्ञान इस विनाशलीला के पीछे कुदरत के कहर को मानता है जबकि यहाँ के लोग इस विनाशलीला के पीछे धारी देवी की प्रतिमा के साथ छेड़छाड़ को बता रहे हैं।” (Zee News 2013, June 27). “Science thinks that behind this *vināś līlā* [huge destruction] is the

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population shows up likewise in the news stories that cover the former resistance against the moving of the temple. The articles and information broadcasted by the TV channels usually describe the local population as having uniformly resisted the relocation of the Goddess. According to these claims, there was even a long-standing belief on the side of the “locals” that any form of tampering with the temple might lead to dangerous consequences. Here is an evidential excerpt from the Hindustan Times:

The locals had been protesting the temple relocation for years saying they will have to face Devi’s wrath but the state government was adamant to shift the deity as without that commissioning of the project would not had been possible.” [. . .]. With flash floods hitting the upper reaches of Uttarakhand on June 16, the locals believe that the tragedy was the Goddess’ ire for being shifted. (Hindustan Times 2013, June 26)

In another report, the local population had even always warned of any disturbance to the Goddess—this allegedly long before the commissioning of a hydropower project:

Since time immemorial, locals here have claimed that angering Dhāri Devī, a form of Goddess Kali, will result in destruction. And their faith has seemingly been avenged, albeit in a tragedy of unimaginable proportions. [. . .] VHP head Ashok Singhal says, ‘People staged protest against the hydro power project and opposed the idea of uplifting the statue.’ (Gusain 2013a)²⁸⁶

Especially in this case, the scrutiny of who speaks for the “locals” becomes crucial, as the former VHP leader is certainly not a local person or brings along a local agenda (more on him in Chapter 5.2.7). This fact is especially significant in light of the Hindu Right’s pursuit of homogenising local cultures within a discourse

degradation of the environment, while the people here say that behind this destruction is the tampering with the statue of Dhāri Devī.”

286 This is the Hindi version from Aaj Tak: “विश्व हिंदू परिषद के अशोक सिंघल ने कहा, ‘लोगों ने हाइड्रो पॉवर प्रोजेक्ट के खिलाफ प्रदर्शन किया था और धारी देवी की प्रतिमा को हटाए जाने का विरोध किया था. लेकिन इसके बावजूद 16 जून को धारी देवी की प्रतिमा को हटाया गया. धारी देवी के गुस्से से ही केदारनाथ और उत्तराखंड के अन्य इलाकों में तबाही मची [. . .]’” (Gusain 2013b). “Ashok Singhal of Vishwa Hindu Parishad said, ‘People had demonstrated against the hydro power project and protested against the removal of the statue of Dhāri Devī. Despite this, the statue of Dhāri Devī was removed on June 16. The anger of Dhāri Devī caused havoc in Kedarnath and other areas of Uttarakhand [. . .].’”

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based on the “reassertion of local values” (Harindranath 2006:23). With his statement, he is definitely reinventing the local perspective by saying, that it was the “people” who protested against the relocation of the Goddess. As already detailed (Chapter 3), there was a protest movement in Srinagar, which later merged with the engagement of religious activists and right-wing actors, but there was no protest from the direct neighbourhood of the Goddess. Quite contrary to his claim, the people from the villages even resisted the activities of the protesters who were against the relocation of the temple. Singhal’s rhetoric, nonetheless, not only falsely suggests that the local population was unitedly opposed to the dam, but also that based on their understanding of the Goddess’s personality, they had always warned against her removal. What is yet more critical, however, is that he purports to represent precisely the interests of this local population.

The reports further claim that the tragedy not only revealed but even strengthened people’s faith, as stated on Zee News, “however, much less than shaking people’s faith, the massive tragedy has reinforced their belief in the divine” (2013, July 2).²⁸⁷ While the Mail Today adds, “Uttarakhand’s raging rivers may have washed away entire towns but belief in the bizarre remains intact in the hill state” (2013, June 27). The assertions are interesting insofar as they ignore the fact that in this case questions of faith are much more an issue of trans-regional concern, at least in the current media discourse. In any case, this conclusion judgmentally presents the local population not only as firm in its belief, but also as naïve, since its faith does not rest on rational experience, but on a concept that is purportedly “bizarre.”

Having demonstrated the picture of the local that the different media conveyed to the public, the following material appears more legitimate to portray events from the local level perspective. The focus in this case is on the reporting of the local edition of the Amar Ujālā. A first notice of the Alaknanda in spate coupled with the relocation of the Dhārī Devī statue could be exemplary for a local cognition as it is based on immediate interaction processes with the environment.

बारिश से जन जीवन अस्त-व्यस्त

श्रीनगर। रविवार देर रात अचानक बढ़े अलकनंदा के जलस्तर को शहर के लोग दैवीय आपदा से जोड़ रहे हैं। क्षेत्र के अधिकतर लोग कह रहे हैं कि प्रकृति का ये प्रकोप धारी देवी मंदिर से छेड़छाड़ का नतीजा है। वजीरों का बाग निवासी वेद प्रकाश काला, एसएन कोठियाल आदि का कहना है कि देवी को जबर्दस्ती उनके स्थान से हटाया गया है। उनके प्रकोप के कारण ही

287 There are in fact studies that back the notion, that people become more devout after a disaster (see Sibley & Bulbulia 2012). However, the media rather uses this statement to build up a certain image about the people of Uttarakhand.

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अलकनंदा रौद्र रूप दिखा रही है। लोगों का मानना है कि देवी की पूजा-अर्चना से ही प्रकृति शांत होगी और तभी इस प्रलयकालीन स्थिति से बचा जा सकता है। (Amar Ujālā 2013, June 18a).

Public life disrupted by rain

Srinagar. The people of the city associate the sudden rise in the water level of the Alaknanda late on Sunday evening [June 16] with the divine disaster. Most people in the area say that this wrath of nature is the result of tampering with the Dhārī Devī Temple. Residents of Wazir Bagh, Ved Prakash Kala, S. N. Kothiyal etc., say that the Goddess was forcibly removed from her place. Due to her wrath, the Alaknanda is showing its violent form. People believe that only by worshiping the Goddess, nature will calm down and only then the flood situation can be averted.

Although this extract links the flood situation to a metaphysical background and more specifically says that it reflects the rage of Dhārī Devī, there is no mention of the Kedarnath disaster yet. The divine wrath is experienced in the neighbourhood in the form of a torrential river and in the midst of an ongoing natural disaster. A further notice in the Amar Ujālā (2013, June 18b) reveals that Kedarnath is cut off from communication services and accordingly there is very little information available on the extent of the tragedy (see also A. Kumar 2015).²⁸⁸ Meanwhile, the people of Srinagar and surrounding villages have the disaster right on their doorstep—with unprecedented masses of rain, landslides, stranded people and a river gone wild—and a displaced goddess a few kilometres away. The perception on the ground is obviously oriented towards the direct experience of the natural event. Correspondingly, the interpretation of the disaster here reflects the situation in the immediate surroundings. The pilgrimage site of Kedarnath, by contrast, is not part of this first-hand experience. An association of the two events obviously emerged only some time later, after mediating instances had entered the interpretation process.²⁸⁹ Another point is that it could not have been in the interest of the local people to blame a goddess for the catastrophe. This kind of an approach

288 “सड़कें और पुल क्षतिग्रस्त होने से मंदाकिनी और केदारघाटी का संपर्क कट चुका है। संचार, विद्युत और पेयजल सेवाएं ठप हो गई हैं।” (Amar Ujālā 2013, June 18b). “The Mandakini and Kedar Valley are cut off due to the damage to roads and bridges. Communication, electricity and drinking water services have come to a standstill.”

289 Moreover, while the national media and public were already busy reflecting on the events, the areas in the mountain region were still in the midst of the disaster. The articles in the Amar Ujālā in the days after the flood in Kedarnath and elsewhere were accordingly full of practical and organisational questions. They were questions of survival—how to rescue

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would have limited their ability to fight for issues such as compensation after a whole neighbourhood in Srinagar had been flooded and destroyed.²⁹⁰ As for the local perspective—the story of Dhārī Devī's rage is hardly covered in the Garhwal edition of the *Amar Ujālā*, though it is considered the news organ closest to local sentiments (Chapter 2.4.1). If this flood interpretation appears at all, it is not on the local but on the national flood special page, or the state-wide page (*pradeś*). When it does, it is ascribed to the “saints” or Uma Bharti and the other actors who accuse the relocation of the Dhārī Devī Temple of being responsible for the Kedarnath disaster.²⁹¹ As late as July 9, the *Amar Ujālā* mentions in one sentence that “people consider the disaster after the Dhārī Devī statue was moved on June 16 as the rage of the Goddess.”²⁹² The related article is about some cracks in the new temple, apparently caused by the onslaught of tree trunks and other debris during and after the flood. By then it had evidently become a popular interpretation, so that these cracks were also ascribed to the wrathful intervention of Dhārī.

Similar to the first note from the *Amar Ujālā*, the initial reports from the local scene at the temple only address the direct experience of threat to the deity that led to her relocation. A broadcast from the Dhārī Devī Temple (India TV 2013) shows how the statue was shifted to higher ground. The scene features *pūjārīs* wading in rushing water and carrying the statue of the Goddess. While performing some hasty rituals, they rescue it from the onslaught of the torrent. The aired images reflect an atmosphere of urgency and emergency. They are dramatic scenes of the rescue of a Goddess from drowning.²⁹³ Here is an excerpt from one of the *pūjārīs*' account of the flood and the threat to the Goddess. The reporter asks him what the picture was like at the time (of the peak of the flood), how much water there was and he enquires about the strength of the current:

इतना तेज़ बहा गया था [. . .], मतलब इतना आरती के बाद इतना भयंकर हो गया था, की हम लोग इतने पानी में, कमर तक की पानी में आ गया, किसी तरफ वह जो है, हाबड़ाबी में मन्त्रों चार के साथ में, जो भी जल्दी भाजी में होता, देवी को बचा लिया गया। अगर पांच मिनट की भी देर होती, तो हम

the people who were still stranded in different places, how to organise the distribution of relief goods to the population as well as the pilgrims etc.

290 In this context, note the concluding remarks in Chapter 6.1. These disclose how even the company commissioned with the construction of the hydroelectric power plant uses the argument of divine intervention to evade responsibility for the damage.

291 *Amar Ujālā* 2013, June 20, 23, 28; July 1a/b.

292 “16 जून को धारी देवी मूर्ति शिफ्टिंग के बाद आई आपदा को लोग देवी का प्रकोप मान रहे हैं।” (*Amar Ujālā* 2013, July 9).

293 See also Chapter 5.2.1 where the author Naveen Nigam exposes the contradiction inherent in this salvation of the deity from the rising waters. Namely, that her supposed anger would eventually be the reaction to her rescue.

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लोग जो हैं सब पांच-सात आदमी जो वहां सात-आठ ब्राह्मण थे, और देवी जी अंतर्धान हो जाते, खतम हो जाते। (India TV 2013)²⁹⁴

It [the river] was flowing so fast, means after the *ārī*, it had become so fierce that we guys came into so much water, until the hip reached the water, in a way it was like this, that in a hurry together with [chanting] some mantras, whatever it was very fast, the Goddess was saved. If it had been just five minutes late, then we guys, that was five men in total who were there, along with eight Brahmins, and the Goddess would have disappeared, we would have been finished.

Another article some days later reiterates the urgency that dominated the event:

16 जून को जब मंदाकिनी नदी में बाढ़ आना शुरू हुई तो मंदिर कमिटी ने धारी देवी की प्रतिमा बचाने के लिए तुरंत एक्शन लिया। धारा [*sic*] देवी मंदिर कमिटी के पूर्व सचिव देवी प्रसाद पांडे के मुताबिक, 'शाम तक मंदिर में घुटने तक पानी भर गया था। ऐसी खबरें थीं कि रात तक बहुत तेज बारिश होने वाली है। तो धारा [*sic*] देवी की प्रतिमा को हटाने के अलावा कोई और रास्ता नहीं था. हमने शाम को 6:30 बजे प्रतिमा को स्थानांतरित किया था।' (Gusain 2013)

When the floods started in the Mandakini river on June 16, the temple committee acted immediately to save the statue of Dhārī Devī. According to Devi Prasad Pandey, former secretary of the Dhārā [*sic*] Devī Temple Committee, 'By evening, the water was filled up till the knee in the temple. There were reports that there would be very heavy rains until night. There was no other way but to remove the statue of Dhārā [*sic*] Devī. We had transferred the statue at 6:30 in the evening.'

Not surprisingly after the dramatic scenes of her salvation, one of the persons closest to the Goddess, the Pūjārī Pandey, strongly rejects the theory of the Goddess or the divine and its influence in Kedarnath. He instead blames anthropogenic causes for the deluge (Firstpost 2013, June 27; IBNlive 2013, June 27a). In his view, the problem and the ones to blame were the dams built in the mountain region. This rift between the expertise about Dhārī Devī emanating from the group of the *pūjārīs* versus the media-supported version is repeated in the interpretation of the cracks in the temple mentioned above. The temple priests again provide a more rational explanation for

294 Interview with Lakshmi Prasad Pandey, *pūjārī* of Dhārī Devī.

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these cracks, in contrast to the supposedly popular notion that recognises the fury of the Goddess in the visible fissures.²⁹⁵ It is interesting that the *pūjārīs*, who one would expect to be the representatives of a transcendental explanation because of their ascribed proximity to the divine, in this case give such clearly down-to-earth reasons for the events around or in connection with the temple. The motivation for this could not only be a side effect of the dramatic rescue operation, but also because the *pūjārīs* appear to have been closely collaborating with the company's plan for the new temple at that moment. An interpretation of the Goddess as "infuriated" over her resettlement would most likely not have been supported by them, for it would also have implied that the Goddess was wrathful about the *pūjārīs*' previous policies.

But how did the flood myth in connection with Dhārī Devī come into existence? According to personal observation, the first visible emergence of the narrative was based on an interview with the local activist Suman Nautiyal in the city of Srinagar. She had participated in the movement to save the former Dhārī Devī Temple. The reports however either just mention her name, or introduce her as a "local resident" or "local devotee" (IBNlive 2013, June 27b) and do not reveal the background of their interviewee:

[. . .] locals and right wing groups have begun blaming a hydro-electric project that forced the moving of a temple and its deity [. . .]. A local resident, Suman Nautiyal, told IBN Live that 'Dhara [*sic*] Devi protected her temple and her devotees all these years . . . then they uprooted the temple and this calamity happened.' (Firstpost 2013, June 27)²⁹⁶

This seems to have been a key interview and the information from this conversation was widely circulated. The press also spoke to other people, for example Beena Chaudhary, another central female figure who was committed to the case of the temple and opposed the construction of the hydropower plant. There may

295 "आम जन इसे देवी का प्रकोप मान रहे हैं लेकिन पुजारियों ने इसे दैवी प्रकोप मानने से साफ इंकार किया है. पुजारियों के मुताबिक बाढ़ के दौरान मंदिर के सपोर्टिंग पिलरों पर भारी तनों और अन्य सामान के टकराने से हुए कंपन के कारण ये दरारें आई हैं." (Amar Ujālā 2013, July 9). "The common people consider it to be the wrath of the Goddess, but the priests have categorically refused to accept it as divine wrath. According to the priests, these cracks were caused by the vibrations resulting from the impact of heavy tree trunks and other items on the supporting pillars of the temple during the flood."

296 This similar quote in Hindi, which also fits in this context, was used earlier in the chapter to illustrate how the media paints a picture of the local population: "अब आस्था में डूबे सुमन नौटियाल जैसे स्थानीय लोग इस जल प्रलय को धारी देवी मंदिर से जोड़कर देख रहे हैं।" (IBNlive 2013, June 27a). "Now, local people like Suman Nautiyal, immersed in their faith, see the flood in connection with the Dhārī Devī Temple."

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have been other respondents in Srinagar who held the same view, but these particular women were not chosen at random; they were activists who were used to dealing with the media. They exhibited a certain professionalism in conversations with journalists that resulted from their previous engagement. Such a background is obviously in contrast to a more classical model of the local propagated by the media, in which simple rural people apply their traditional knowledge of the environment. The flood imagination instead originated from an urban center and from well-connected environmental activists. The ostensibly local facet conveyed by the media was thus already informed in large part by ideas, statements and agendas of actors, who had dealt with the issue of the Goddess prior to this. In this way, that specific version of a disaster reading not only became a continuation of the earlier struggle for the preservation of the Dhārī Devī Temple, but at the same time the purported narrative of the locals turns into a politicised issue driven by the agency and interests of certain groups.

The question of the “local” also gains importance from another angle, which is the location of Srinagar and the limitations of access to the mountain region. Given the strong interest of the media in providing information about the catastrophe among an initial “information gap,” the first basic condition for the creation of the narrative had to do with geographical conditions. The area of the disaster epicenter was cut off from the outside world for the first days after the floods and was therefore inaccessible to reporters.²⁹⁷ A large part of the media personnel remained stuck in Srinagar and the city was one of the places where communication facilities were still intact.²⁹⁸ This confinement to a place constituted a decisive factor that probably prompted a focus on the Dhārī Devī Temple issue and thereupon helped to create the flood narrative of the deity. The media reports themselves reveal Srinagar in Uttarakhand as an initially vital location and base for accounts on the disaster. Evidently, in the midst of this situation and under the earlier discussed media principle of interviewing members of the public in the absence of comprehensive disaster information (Sood et al. 1987), the reporters, in their urgent need

297 In fact, already on June 17 the Amar Ujālā reported that the administration closed the Badrinath highway for at least two days and the pilgrims could not travel any further than Srinagar. “श्रीनगर से आगे न जाएं तीर्थयात्री, प्रशासन ने कहा-दो दिन बंद रहेगा बदरी-केदार मार्ग – श्रीनगर। कई स्थानों पर ऋषिकेश-बदरीनाथ राष्ट्रीय राजमार्ग के बंद रहने से हजारों यात्री मार्गों पर फंसे रहे। अब पुलिस प्रशासन ने घोषणा की है कि बदरी-केदार राष्ट्रीय राजमार्ग दो दिन तक बंद रहेगा। यात्रियों से अनुरोध है कि वह श्रीनगर में ही रुकें।” (Amar Ujālā 2013, June 17). “Pilgrims advised not to go beyond Srinagar, administration said Badri-Kedar route will remain closed for two days [headline]. Srinagar. Thousands of passengers were stranded at many places on the routes due to the closure of the Rishikesh-Badrinath National Highway. Now, the police administration has announced that the Badri-Kedar National Highway will be closed for two days. Travelers are requested to stay in Srinagar itself.”

298 Compare the video on Zee News (2013, July 1) min 7:12 to 7:27.

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for information, and the activists, who were still trying to promote their vision of the Dhārī Devī Temple, formed a common bond of interest. The story thus partly reflects the situation of the reporters stranded halfway to Kedarnath, and at the same time embraces the mutual interests of these actors involved.

Since geographical features appear to have played a crucial role in shaping the discourse, this feature calls for a further look at geographical orientations. There was yet another geographical aspect that strongly influenced the flood interpretation with regard to the Devī. Although the narrative of Dhārī Devī and Kedarnath involves two sites, it is evident that the association of the two places with each other could only take place at one of them—and that was the one at a lower altitude. To substantiate this claim, it is necessary to look at the interpretation of the disaster from Kedarnath's perspective. Also in places like Kedarnath and the other *dhām*, the *pūjārīs* offered an analysis of the disaster. But the perspective from these uphill places is not directed towards a downstream place like the temple at Kaliyasaur. The Mail Today (2013, June 27) quotes the Pūjārī Vageeshling from Kedarnath on the catastrophe: “Prakriti ka prakop hai, Bhagwan ka krodh hai, sab nasht ho gaya (It is the wrath of nature and anger of God, everything has been destroyed).” Apparently, the *pūjārī* also detects supernatural reasons behind the catastrophe, the rage however is ascribed to nature and to god.²⁹⁹ He sees a more general wrath of the divine and is not concerned with the Dhārī Devī story. As this statement illustrates, from the viewpoint of Kedarnath and the other high mountain places, it would be rather irrational to look for the explanation of a disaster in an area downstream. Cross-cultural human conceptions typically locate the divine as above or at a greater elevation (see Meier et al. 2007). Even at a high altitude, the divine is again directed upwards, ascending to the peaks or pointing towards the sky.³⁰⁰ For this reason, from a location 3500 metres above sea level, it seems highly unlikely to look for the root of destruction in a tiny spot at least 2000 metres below. This could rather be understood as a sacrilege against the sublime majesty of the high mountain resort and the presiding divine powers. A reading of the disaster by Shashidharling Swami, the chief *pūjārī* of the Vishwanath temple in Guptakashi, illustrates precisely this ascendant view. While designating “the natural calamity as divine punishment for human excess” he adds, “yes this is a message from above. The message is in the destruction that rained from the skies” (as cited in VOI 2013). The human misconduct he talks about refers more explicitly to morally

299 In this context, note Groh et al. (2003:27), who characterise the figure of avenging nature in the 20th century as a recurrence of the motif of divine punishment.

300 See Eck's poetic description of the pilgrimage path, which refers to the perceived presence of the divine beyond the horizon: “Even more, these tracks of connection stretch from this world toward the horizon of the infinite, linking this world with the world beyond” (Eck 2012:5).

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reprehensible behavior on the part of modern pilgrims. Vageeshling Swami, the chief purohit of the Kedarnath Dhām, also comments on this: “so many people, who have no feeling of piety or devotion, visit Kedarnath. They go to Kedarnath only to have fun and enjoy themselves, with a mindset which has nothing to do with faith and worship” (as cited in VOI 2013).³⁰¹ So the discussion from Kedarnath’s vantage point again revolves around locally meaningful and observable factors (honeymoon couples, meat eating, alcohol consumption etc.) and the divine retribution moves from top to bottom, from heaven to earth.³⁰² The interpretation of the connection of Dhārī Devī and Kedarnath is thus possible either from a geographically lower standpoint or from the viewpoint of an external observer. This refers to anyone viewing, or visualising, the abstract map of the Himalayan sacred space from a distance.³⁰³

The analysis of the issue of the “local” and locality demonstrates that the media conveyed a picture of the disaster’s interpretation that is congruent with the image of Uttarakhand as it is generally cultivated among Hindus in the rest of the country, or which corresponds to their “mental landscape.” To appeal to the understanding of this nation-wide audience, the media built an imaginary about an indigenous population that is still supposed to be traditional, deeply rooted in a religious world-view and in a state of “purity” as untouched by modernity. While treating the narrative as an indicator of a backward local knowledge, they present the story of the Goddess’s wrath like a typical regional lore.³⁰⁴ Comparisons between the media generated image and impressions from a local level rather showed that the account of the deluge is more a hallmark of a culture that is at least to some extent

301 The correct attitude in accordance with the image of God Śiva would be as follows: “Lord Shiva is a bairagi. He has nothing to do with materialism and desire. People come here in the wrong spirit. Just as Lord Shiva has discarded everything, so should the people who come here; they should give up all worldly thoughts to cleanse themselves” (as cited in VOI 2013).

302 This flow of the divine from above to below is also reflected in the legends about the emergence of Goddess Dhārī. Her traditional birthplace is in Kālīmaṭh and from there she came travelling down to her present place by the river. In this way, a sacred site further up in the mountains is spun into the local legend. In Kālīmaṭh itself, however, there is no reference to Dhārī Devī, or any other goddess further downhill.

303 Kvanneid (2018) presented an interesting and apparently appropriated disaster reading in a village in the Himalayan foothills, where there was a fusion of the Dhārī Devī-Kedarnath narrative with conceptions of the village’s cosmological preference for the God Śiva.

304 The idea of the local promoted by the media clearly bears the signature of modernist discourses. “What Dirlik terms ‘modernist teleology’ informed and continue to support developmental projects, whereby the local, by definition, is considered backward—a site of rural passivity opposed to the dynamic logic of industrialism and urban culture, inhabited by communities in thrall to unscientific beliefs and outmoded customs” (Harindranath 2006:21).

modern, networked and permeated by mass and other media. Evidently, this is as prevalent in the mountain region as in other parts of India.

5.2.5 A King, Kedarnath and Dhārī Devī— Invented Historicity and Geomantic Axes

इससे पहले अठारा सौ बायसी में गढ़वाल के एक राजा ने धारी देवी की मूर्ति को यहाँ से स्थापित करने का प्रयास किया था। कहते हैं की उस दिन भी धारी देवी ने प्राकृतिक के माध्यम से अपना गुस्सा जताया था। उस दिन बड़ी लैंडस्लैड हुए और खेदार घाटी में बड़ी नुकसान हुआ था। उस समय भी ज्योतिर्लिंग का कुछ नहीं बिगड़ गया था और इस बार भी ज्योतिर्लिंग सुरक्षित रहा। (Zee News 2013, July 1, 07 : 11 min.)

Before that, in 1882, one King of Garhwal had tried to remove the statue from here. As the saying goes, also on that day, Dhārī Devī expressed her rage through nature. On that day, a huge landslide occurred and caused great damage in the Kedar valley. Even at that time, the Jyotirlinga was not damaged, just as now the Jyotirlinga remained protected.

The investigation continues here in terms of geographical aspects as they were relevant to the formation of the Dhārī Devī-Kedarnath myth. The topic in this subchapter is even further decoupled from the local level. The above story sprang up as a co-legend along with the flood narrative of Dhārī Devī's curse as cause for the Kedarnath disaster. Most of the surveyed news channels, articles and blogs, repeated and retold this story of the king who had allegedly tried to remove the statue as early as in 1882 (or also 1880).³⁰⁵ The legend not only found its way onto the official Wikipedia site about Dhārī Devī, but also into scholarly works.

305 Here are some excerpts: "It's said that a similar attempt by a king in 1882 had resulted in a landslide that had flattened Kedarnath" (*Dainik Jāgraṇ* 2013, June 25). Zee News even saw the Hydropower Project laying in ruins: "As per believers, Uttarakhand had to face the Goddess' ire as she was shifted from her 'mool sthan' (original abode) to make way for a 330 MW hydel project that now lies in ruins. A similar attempt in 1882 by a local king had resulted in a landslide that had flattened Kedarnath" (Zee News 2013, July 2). "माँ काली का रूप मानी जाने वाली धारी देवी के इस मंदिर के बारे में यह भी कहा जाता है कि 1880 में भी धारी देवी को हटाने का प्रयास हुआ था, तब भी केदारनाथ में भयंकर बाढ़ आ गई थी। उसके पश्चात धारी देवी को फिर किसी ने हटाने का प्रयास नहीं किया।" (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4). "It is also said about this temple of Dhārī Devī, who is considered a form of Mother Kālī, that also in 1880 an attempt was made to remove Dhārī Devī; even then there was a severe flood in Kedarnath. After that, nobody ever tried again to remove Dhārī Devī."

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Mishra (2016) accredits the tale of a local king's attempt to move the statue, which "resulted in a landslide that flattened Kedarnath," to local historians. It appears in the various media with minor variations, for example, that the king had tried to construct a roof over Dhārī Devī's head (Gusain 2013b). The two stories became so closely interwoven, that the search term "1882 Garhwal flood" brings up a number of websites related to the Dhārī Devī Temple.

The tale of the king is particularly remarkable because, despite the explicit mention of the year 1882, there is no historical evidence for it. No such natural disaster appears to have occurred in Garhwal or Uttarakhand, all the more so as the major flood disasters of the last 200 years in this area are quite well documented (Gulia 2007; Agarwal & Narain 1991).³⁰⁶ The chronologically closest heavy rainfall event occurred in 1880, a year that was also mentioned in connection with this narrative. But the major calamity in the wake of this catastrophe was a landslide in Nainital that killed 150 people,³⁰⁷ and which is nowhere near Kedarnath. The verification of the historicity exposes this legend as another media construct. Presumably, the aim of its creation was to lend historical backing to the modern myth. This goes hand in hand with another practice of the media, which is to consider disasters in the context of similar events (Sood et al. 1987). Since it would mean placing them in the context of other flood events, this story would fit well with such an attempt. Secondly, a theme typical of the Indian context emerges, namely the great significance of lines of tradition (Malinar 2018). In this specific case, it would be the lineage of mytho-historical disasters that confers a heightened significance to a present-day catastrophe.

From a historical point of view, it is already questionable that in an age and at a time when there were no mass media or rapid means of communication, two events that took place so far apart from each other would have been considered connected. But what ultimately exposes this alleged historical legend as a modern myth are again topographical considerations. For this, one needs to cast a glance at the locality of Kedarnath in the past time. Two available photographs of the site from 1882 show a temple in a field of flowers and a few scattered stone huts³⁰⁸ (Figure 15 and 16). The vulnerability index of the area is obviously very low—there was no human settlement, hardly any man-made structures except for the temple, and the pilgrimage to the sanctuary took the form of day trips from the nearest village of

306 See Gulia (2007:309) for a compilation of floods and other disasters in the region, or Agarwal and Narain (1991:33) who situate the chronologically closest heavy rainfall event for the Himalayas and Garhwal region in 1880.

307 The Imperial Gazetteer of India reported that "in September 1880, after three days continuous rain, a landslip occurred, which caused the death of forty-three Europeans and 108 natives, besides damage to property amounting to about 2 lakhs" (The Imperial Gazetteer of India 1908:333).

308 Called *chhan* (Uniyal 2013:1472)

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Figure 15. Kedarnath Temple in 1882 (Source: Chauhan 2013).

Gaurikund (Uniyal 2013).³⁰⁹ So there was hardly anything that could have been subject to devastation. A disaster though, is deemed a social construct and is above all defined by human vulnerability; a natural event in an uninhabited place lacks these crucial features of a disaster.³¹⁰ The idea of a past event resembling the flood of 2013 evidently represents a false historicity or a re-imagined past created from the ideas and framework of a modern backdrop. The alleged historical proof underlying this narrative is accordingly a modern-day product in historical disguise.

309 “For most parts of its history (at least since 8th century AD), there was no human habitation in Kedarnath, except the temple” (Centre for Education and Documentation 2013:5).

310 Definition of disaster according to Oliver-Smith (1999:73) “A disaster takes place when a destructive force intersects with a community in a socially configured pattern of vulnerability. [. . .]. A vulnerability profile is a historical and evolutionary product that influences the way a disaster develops far more than the physical force of the destructive agent.” Another quote from his landmark book on disaster research is similar in content, “Disaster is seen as a process leading to an event that involves a combination of a potentially destructive agent from the natural or technological sphere and a population in a socially produced condition of vulnerability” (Oliver-Smith 1999:4).



Figure 16. “Southside of Temple, Kedarnath, Garhwal, 1882”
(Source: Chauhan 2013).

5.2.6 When the Balance is Lost, Comes the Flood

The landscape not only connects places to the lore of gods, heroes, and saints, but it connects places to one another through local, regional, and transregional practices of pilgrimage. Even more, these tracks of connection stretch from this world toward the horizon of the infinite, linking this world with the world beyond. The pilgrim’s India is a vividly imagined landscape that has been created not by homing in on the singular importance of one place, but by the linking, duplication, and multiplication of places so as to constitute an entire world. (Eck 2012:5)

Apart from the story of 1882, there have been other endeavours within the media discourse to establish a connection between the site of the Devī and Kedarnath—or to reconfirm an allegedly previously identified connection—in order to justify an impact of a local event on an event at another location. The very foundation

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of these conceptions lies in the network of sacralised rivers that form the natural links between places. Culturally conceived motifs then represent an extension of the geophysical conditions. Eck vividly illustrates in the above quote how imagined connections are made between different places through pilgrimage practices and also the wanderings of prominent historical figures (cf. Chapter 2.3.2).³¹¹ In the media, a spatial bond is reinforced by the purported construction of the two sacred sites according to the specifications of certain *śāstras*, holy scriptures. This prerequisite not only guarantees the balance in the mountain area, but also protection against flood catastrophes.

मान्यताओं के मुताबिक धारी देवी और केदारनाथ दोनों की स्थापना तंत्र-शास्त्र पर की गई है, जो पहाड़ों और नदियों की बाढ़ से इस क्षेत्र की रक्षा करती हैं।
(Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4)

According to belief, both Dhārī Devī and Kedarnath were installed on the basis of the Tantra Śāstras, [an arrangement] which protects the mountains and rivers in this region from floods.

The notion of a linkage between the two places, however, is shifted to a new level and unfolds an elevated transcendental quality in blogs and comments found on the web. The Delhi-based astrologer Sanjay Rath (2013) published on his business website his individual interpretation of the reasons for the disaster in Kedarnath. In his reading, it is imaginary lines between places that reveal the fundamental energetic channels and cosmic forces in the area (Figure 17).

Now, the lower half of the deity of Kali is located in Kalimath Temple. These joint temples are aligned exactly at NE-SW direction [. . .] symbolizing Kali as sleeping with her feet in NE direction and head in the SE direction. This causes the energy to flow in the NE direction [. . .]. The upper part of the devi with the head symbolizes the calming of Kali by Shiva, the Guru. The lower part of Kali is not in the form of an [*sic*] deity and instead, is worshipped as the Sri Yantra. In this manner we learn that the Sri Yantra, as established by Adi Shankara at Kalimath, is the yoni of Shakti from which all creation proceeds. The Kedarnath jyotirlinga is exactly North from Kalimath [. . .] symbolising the husband-wife or Shiva-Shakti relationship. In this, Kedarnath

311 In the mountain culture, the networks of kinship relations would have to be added as linkages between geographical locations.

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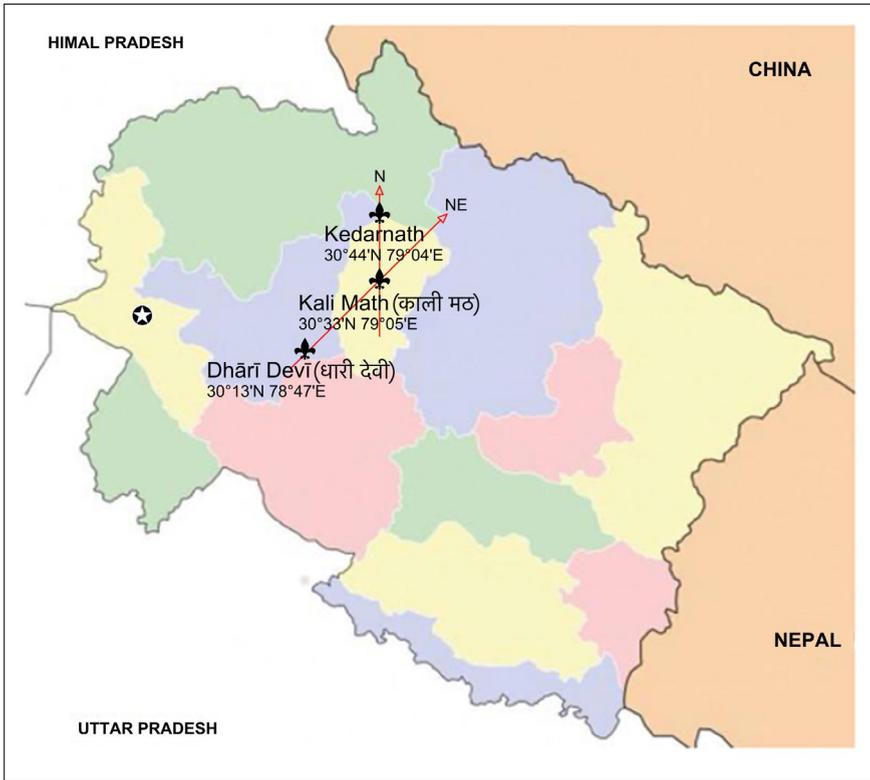


Figure 17. The Arrangement of the Geomantic Axes in Uttarahand (Source: Rath 2013).

being to the north is constantly calming the devi who is in the south.” [. . .]. They [the villagers] were right in their belief as any movement would lead to a change in the angle of the Dhari Devi and Kalimath alignment, besides altering the distance. [. . .]. With the shifting of Dhari Devi, the agitated Kali has been woken up, and she seeks the demon Raktabija (seed of blood). [. . .]. Primarily this indicates unimaginable bloodshed and death.” (Rath 2013)

The analysis concludes that the only remedy for restoring the energetic balance of the area and even the whole country is to return Dhārī Devī to her original

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place.³¹² But the disturbance at the site of Dhārī Devī did not alone trigger the event at Kedarnath. Rather, the entire balance of an energetic system was so upset that the catastrophe in the upper mountain region only marked the beginning of an even more extensive wave of destruction that would be unleashed by primordial forces throughout the subcontinent.

Discernible from this text is that the author is devoid of a local rooting or direct interaction with the local setting, and thereby the possibilities of interpreting the disaster in terms of Dhārī Devī's resettlement became limitless. Rath analyses the events against his own urban-based background and integrates the topic into a metropolitan way of knowledge production, while applying his religious beliefs and mental mapping of the Himalayan space. Regardless of the relevance or non-relevance of the presented "geomantic" ideas, these elaborations left their imprint on the web. Either owing to the author's recognised position and authority as an astrologer and spiritual guide, or because of the largely coherent and impressive nature of his text, it has been copied by several other sites.³¹³ The Speaking Tree website (2013), a supplement of *The Times of India*, published this text in full. The map drawn by the astrologer is also featured in a TV special of the South Indian Telugu-language channel Inews (Inewslivenet 2013b: 0:23 min.). A blogger (Sonalikar 2013), according to his information based in Bangalore, commented on the copied text in more detail. The nature of his introduction to the article, fits the typical image of the young, male, urban and RSS-inspired blogger identified by Udupa (2015). The opening lines referring to "atheistic Government leaders" (Sonalikar 2013) clearly mimic the rhetoric of the late RSS leader Ashok Singhal (cf. Chapter 5.2.7). This is another indication of how the astrological view on the catastrophe and its metaphysical implications were gradually integrated into a "Hindutva" discourse.³¹⁴

Our fore fathers placed a fierce looking idol and gave us this instructions:

[. . .] she be called Dhari Devi—Dhari from dhara means stream – she is the one who controls the stream.

{3} do not anger her by moving her from this location this will result in destruction

312 "Restore the deity of Dhari Devi (Kali torso) to its original shrine and start the prayers that calm her down. Shri Yantra sadhana has to be maintained at Kalimath and Bael leaf must be offered to Kedarnath. If this is done, then Kali will calm down and the agitation of nature will stop. If this is not done, then the agitation of Kali shall spread throughout India and this will prove to be one of the worst years in the history of modern India" (Rath 2013).

313 IndiaDivine.org 2013; Chsrk 2013; Matah 2013; IS 2013.

314 A discourse on Hindu identity.

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By saying that do not move her no matter what—they told us DO NOT LET THE WATER LEVEL RISE ABOVE THIS POINT. They gave us a message in Environmental science. (Bhoj 2013)

The quote here repeats the pattern of giving faith-based ideas a scientific veneer while labelling it “environmental science.” Behind it is another of the bloggers that Udupa (2015) classified as young, educated and urban, and who make up the majority of commentators on religious topics on the web. Yet he seems less concerned with Hindu nation-building, and more with giving religious backing to ecological issues. His articulations refer to an idealised state of natural equilibrium preserved by previous generations, and the Goddess is described as a central element in maintaining this equilibrium. These ancestors are said to have had a more comprehensive knowledge of the environment, but their equilibrium system has been disturbed by recent developmental activities.

The third commentator to be introduced at this point approaches the subject of the Dhārī Devī Temple from a rather distinguished and sophisticated angle. The Delhi-based author Niraj Kumar (2013) obviously did thorough research on the Goddess and combined the story of her and the flood with his broad cultural and historical background knowledge. Having previously published a “scientific” work on a subject he calls “geophilosophy”³¹⁵ or “geometaphysics,” he approaches the subject possibly with some self-promotional intent from the perspective of this esoteric system. Like other media reports, his account of the deluge resembles passages from the Purāṇas.

Mahakali of Dhari is also the Ugratara and the Chhinamastika, the Goddess of the lightning.³¹⁶ The clouds burst, the dams burst, the reservoirs burst. The glaciers broke, the roads collapsed. Buildings and mules, men and vegetation were swept away in the pralaya. It was only when the flood water reached the sanctum sanctorum of Kedarnath and touched the Sivalingam, the wrath stopped suddenly. The goddess Mahakali calmed. It was like the mythical story in which Shiva had to lie down and when Kali’s feet touched Shiva, she calmed. Kedar Shiva calmed Dhari’s Mahakali. (N. Kumar 2013)

315 According to his book, the core of Geophilosophy constitutes the idea that “[. . .] the geographical positioning of a country influences its thinking and thus impacts its philosophy” (N. Kumar 2014:19).

316 This comparison to other manifestations of the female primordial energy is obviously taken from Naithany’s (1995) chapter on the Dhārī Devī Temple.

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What he argues is that elements of Srinagar's better-researched past may instead have taken place at the very site of the Devī. From his observations, he not only concludes that "Dhari/Srinagar" might be "the place to propitiate Mahakali" (N. Kumar 2013), but he also indicates that the site could have formed the centre of the Śrī Vidyā tradition, as well as a transit point of tantric Buddhism to Tibet.³¹⁷ It exceeds the scope of the thesis to discuss such theories further; but the intention of his text is obviously to increase the historical and thus the metaphysical importance of the site. This would reinforce the assumption that interventions in its balance caused such a great catastrophe. Niraj Kumar equally advises that the temple be restored to its original site because the upset metaphysical or geo-metaphysical equilibrium needs to be reinstated. Balance in this case is based less on imaginary axes than on mytho-historical webs.³¹⁸ This account and historical substantiation of the "divine" catastrophe is by far the most elaborate, but seems to have had little impact on the online community. Perhaps because of its sophisticated complexity—the text was manifestly neither copied nor cited.

This section demonstrated how further individual and partly political interests shaped the Dhārī Devī narrative and the accompanying public discourse. It simultaneously established how the discursive process unfolded at an ever increasing distance to the local level. Different articles and especially blog entries and individual websites created meaningful connections between the two places in question, whether in the form of historical attributions, by replicating typical motifs of religious scriptures or by applying imagined, metaphysical-geographical axes. "Equilibrium" was a central theme in this section, as an alleged earlier state of balance ran through the introduced narratives. Anthropogenic agency then uprooted the balance, leading to the recent flood with its apocalyptic dimensions. This is propagated as the definite cause for the catastrophe. The underlying conceptual geography that forms the background in this chapter largely exhibits a perspective as cultivated in the Indian plains. Even though the last author displays an intimate knowledge of local tradition and historiography, his account seems far too complex and detached to present locally traded ideas about a catastrophe. As outlined in Chapter 5.2.4, these would typically take a much simpler and more down-to-earth form. In this way, he also fails to address the mountain people's understanding and essential concerns regarding a flood disaster. The various interpretations portrayed hence originate from actors with a national background who not only claim the "divine territory" for themselves in

317 These ideas are also advocated in Naithany's (1995) book.

318 Nevertheless, he holds mainly the GVK company and, in a "criminal and sinful complicity," the state administration responsible for upsetting the balance through the transfer of the Goddess, including the disastrous consequences of this act that has claimed the lives of thousands of innocent people.

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order to nourish their religious identity, but who at the same time seek to assume interpretive sovereignty over the cause of the catastrophe in the mountains.

5.2.7 The Communal Effervescence— When a Disaster Myth turns Fundamentalist

The first half of the above heading is an excerpt from the English summary found on the same website of the Hindi article by Naveen Nigam, which sheds critical light on the Dhārī Devī question (see Chapter 5.2.4). In full, it reads, “the Communal effervescence is being seen over Dhari Devi in Uttarakhand after the natural disaster” (Nigam 2013). The following text seeks to decipher the quality and significance of this flare-up of communal rhetoric, respectively the roles and political agendas of the actors from the religious spectrum who were involved in the interpretation process of the disaster.

Whether labelled ‘man-made’ or ‘natural,’ disaster events highlight ongoing power struggles in society. The control of information in the media or in public discourse, as well as the attempt to control the social production of meaning, is an attempt to define reality in accordance with a favored political agenda and therefore must be seen as a distinctly ideological process. The framing process both constructs and reconstructs meaning in a selective manner that legitimizes some accounts while obscuring others, privileging some political agendas and negating others. (Button 2002:146)

As this introductory quotation reiterates, the mechanisms of interpretation after a catastrophe are understood as an intrinsic political process, and even more so is a metaphysically shaped interpretation of a catastrophe strongly intertwined with ideological and political objectives (Bhattacharjee 2015). When examining religious-political agendas in this case study, it is necessary to consider the special status of religious actors in India. Since the pervasive diffusion of Hindu nationalist ideology along with the election of a “growing number of swamis and sadhus to public office at the local, state, and national levels” (McKean 1996:6),³¹⁹ the country witnessed the establishment of wide-ranging ties between politics and religion (see Alley 2000) and between religious and political leaders. This development is augmented by the formation of a religious-political celebrity culture (J. Mukherjee

319 In this connection see the article of Verma (2018) about Saints being set up for upcoming elections.

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2004).³²⁰ Cults related to religious prominence encompass the recent emergence of the phenomenon of mega-gurus (Larios & Voix 2018), who shape the religious practice of large parts of the urban middle class. Celebrities also frequently play a special role in the post-disaster recovery phase (Alexander 2015). The merging of political agendas with the process of coping with disasters also goes hand in hand with the media's policy of basing its coverage on information from authoritative figures. The inclusion of religious actor's positions in news reports is therefore consistent with this approach (Sood et al 1987). In the case of Uttarakhand, representatives of a religious-political spectrum would be in the authoritative position to comment on events affecting a perceived sacred space or sacralised region. Nevertheless, it is not only the media that seek out the authorities, but also the religious leaders themselves who cultivate a proximity to the media. Research found that especially the Hindu right-wing sections are well aware of the role and use of the media and increasingly the social media (see Udupa 2015). Yet the use of media strategies is now a common practice among worldwide and cross-religious authorities (see Cheong 2012). It should be noted that the media themselves are also criticised for having "assiduously reinforced [. . .] culture and values" and thus have become "an important nodal point in the production and circulation of fundamentalist ideologies" (Thomas 2008:35). The right-wing interest in the region, the "*dev bhūmi*," is naturally very high, since Hindu spaces relevant to their belief system, such as this area, are mainstays of their Hindutva agenda.³²¹

Already the earliest persons who—publicly noticeable—commented on the flood came with their respective political objectives, such as local actor Suman Nautiyal who, as one of the first protagonists, brought up the motif of the Devī's rage (see Chapter 5.2.4). Similarly Beena Chaudhary, who supported the divine wrath theory, was part of the movement to prevent the relocation of the Goddess and her temple. In this way, the idea of the Goddess's fury may have directly expressed the anger of the hitherto disregarded adherents of the movement. Their statements though drew wider circles and eventually ended up in the hands of the religious hardliners.

कुछ संतों का भी कहना है कि धारी देवी की मूर्ति को हटाया गया था और इसी कारण जलप्रलय हुआ जो निश्चित रूप से धारी देवी का ही प्रकोप है। उनका यह भी कहना है कि धारी देवी के गुस्से से ही केदारनाथ और उत्तराखंड के अन्य इलाकों में तबाही मची। (Prabhasakshi 2013, July 4).

320 As for example McKean (1996:11) states that "[. . .] leaders of religious organizations propagate beliefs and practices that assist in legitimating the power of ruling-class groups."

321 Compare how Kong and Woods (2016) depict the appropriation and configuration of space as a highly political matter.

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Some saints also say that the statue of Dhārī Devī was removed and this led to the deluge, which is definitely the wrath of Dhārī Devī. They also say that only because of Dhārī Devī's anger did the devastation occur in Kedarnath and other areas of Uttarakhand.

Since actors from the religious spectrum are obviously regarded as experts who can contribute their specialised knowledge on a sacred space, the presence of these figures in quotes and interviews is the first striking feature when looking at the variety of newspaper articles, broadcasts, blogs and news sites. While most of these faith-based authorities reflect on divine justice and retribution, they do not unanimously support the idea of Dhārī Devī's wrath. Although the discourse on this topic indeed unfolds in a nuanced and differentiated manner, it seems as if the most extreme and assertive voices have attained the interpretative dominance. The most prominent and most cited person in this regard is Uma Bharti—and with the most extreme attitude excels the religious hardliner and former VHP leader Ashok Singhal. Starting from this identified most extreme stance, it is traced here how a seemingly “innocent” or “naïve” local narrative became a political issue of right-wing ideology and Hindu identity, including its incendiary effect.

As previously noted (see Chapter 5.2.4), although Ashok Singhal's rhetoric about the mountain catastrophe implied that he was committed to and spoke for the local people, his further argumentation made clear how he used the issue of the Devī and the Kedarnath tragedy to gain political ground. At the same time, he lashed out at his opponents with his primary contention that Dhārī Devī's ire was directed against the “atheists [*nāstik log*] ruling the country” (Gusain 2013b).³²² With this remark, he openly blames the then ruling Congress Party, the party that made secularism its trademark, for the catastrophe in the mountain region. Unlike in other global contexts where the term atheist would be perceived as neutral, its meaning in the Indian political discourse has a clear negative connotation and its conception is especially construed by the Hindu Right as anti-Hindu (B. Rao 2006; Jaffrelot 2008).³²³ In this respect, the designation “atheist” also assumes relevance to the communal question. The incendiary factor in Singhal's widely circulated assertion that the rage of Dhārī Devī was directed against the atheists becomes

322 The same statement reported Nigam (2013); Prabhasakshi (2013, July 4); Mail Today (2013, June 27). In an NDI news clip (Newsdeskindia 2013), Singhal in a fit of rage at a press conference in Delhi, even directly accuses the journalists interviewing him of being atheists after they had expressed doubts over his mythological analysis of the Kedarnath disaster.

323 One statement attributed to Singhal reads: “secularisation is the biggest enemy of the nation” (Rangaswami 2003). See also the conclusive article “Ravi Kumar Atheist: The Indian man fighting to be godless” (G. Pandey 2019).

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manifest in the impact left by his remark in the commentary section below the main text. As one Rajesh posted on June 30, for example: “exactly these political parties will be very supportive to the Muslims and Christians” (Gusain 2013b). Thereby, the term “atheist” in the RSS context almost takes on the extremely adverse meaning of disbeliever particularly from an Islamic background. At the very least, it implicates that a non-believer either has a proximity to Islam or supports groups or mindsets that are opposed to the Hindu nation. Another note from the same comment section, referring to Ashok Singhal’s declaration, confirms this impression and reveals the direction in which the debate is heading: “authorities would not have tampered with local’s belief if it was a church or masjid. They do not care Hindu sentiment at all. It is our faults [*sic*] also. We have become disrespectful of our own culture in the name of science and freedom of thought” (Gusain 2013a).³²⁴

Now the alleged lesson Dhārī Devī wanted to teach the “atheists” is that these leaders should keep their hands off the Himalayas—the Himalayas here certainly not understood as an ecologically fragile area, but as a central feature of the Hindu nation. “[. . .] धारी देवी देश के नास्तिक लोगों को समझाना चाहती थीं कि हिमालय और यहां की नदियों को ना छुआ जाए” (Gusain 2013b). “Dhārī Devī wanted the atheists of this country to understand that they should not touch the Himalayas and its rivers.” With these words, Singhal succeeds in holding the Congress government responsible not only for the presumed harmful construction of the hydropower projects, but equally for the destruction of the sanctity of the Himalayan landscape.³²⁵ It is important to keep in mind that the agenda of activists who belonged in any way to the political spectrum, especially the BJP, was permeated by the power struggle between the BJP in opposition and the then Congress government throughout the period of the Srinagar Hydropower Plant dispute (e.g. Baniyal 2012). Yet Ashok Singhal only made a peripheral appearance during the conflict. Only in 2013, shortly before the disaster, did one of his remarks emerge that referred to the struggle over Dhārī Devī.³²⁶ Since he had already warned of serious consequences

324 “posted by: Ritu June 29, 2013”

325 The full paragraph, “विश्व हिंदू परिषद के अशोक सिंघल ने कहा, ‘लोगों ने हाइड्रो पॉवर प्रोजेक्ट के खिलाफ प्रदर्शन किया था और धारी देवी की प्रतिमा को हटाए जाने का विरोध किया था. लेकिन इसके बावजूद 16 जून को धारी देवी की प्रतिमा को हटाया गया. धारी देवी के गुस्से से ही केदारनाथ और उत्तराखंड के अन्य इलाकों में तबाही मची. धारी देवी देश के नास्तिक लोगों को समझाना चाहती थीं कि हिमालय और यहां की नदियों को ना छुआ जाए’” (Gusain 2013b). “Ashok Singhal of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad said, ‘People had demonstrated against the hydro power project and opposed the removal of the statue of Dhārī Devī. Despite this, the statue of Dhārī Devī was moved on June 16. Dhārī Devī’s anger caused havoc in Kedarnath and other areas of Uttarakhand. Dhārī Devī wanted the atheists of the country to understand that the Himalayas and the rivers here should not be touched.’”

326 “धारी देवी मंदिर का प्रश्न हमेशा के लिए हल होना चाहिए। सरकार भले ही कितने नाटक क्यों न करे इस मंदिर को कभी भी तोड़ने नहीं दिया जाएगा। धारी देवी उत्तराखंडवासियों की कुल देवी हैं। सरकार ने यदि इसे तोड़ने का साहस किया तो गंभीर परिणाम भुगतने पड़ेंगे। – अशोक सिंघल, अध्यक्ष विश्व हिंदू

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and made cryptic threats with his statement, the catastrophe then represented a suitable moment—to appropriate the flood as the predicted consequence of the government’s malpractice. This notwithstanding, his comments on Dhārī Devī must also be seen in the context of his involvement in the Tehri Dam struggle (cf. Chapter 3.1; 4.1). Since then, his attitude towards dams and his advocacy of free-flowing rivers are well known, and so his remarks on every other dam conflict reactivate certain chains of associations. In this way, he does not even have to explicitly employ communal rhetoric or articulate the objective of a Hindu nation, but merely his personal intervention in a matter involving hydropower projects, ties the issue to the associated central agendas.

The second notable right-wing personality to express her views on the catastrophe is the other controversial politician, Sādhvī Uma Bharti. As laid out previously (Chapter 3.2), she was a prominent activist in the temple issue even before the catastrophe. Because of her established position in the case, she was consequently also one of the most sought-after commentators on the mythical reading of the flood disaster (see Amar Ujālā 2013, June 20; Amar Ujālā 2013, June 23). After the deluge, she is especially fervent in promoting the Goddess as the protector of Garhwal and its pilgrimage destinations and also insists that she had warned of the disaster:³²⁷

उमा भारती ने कहा है कि उन्होंने प्रशासन और शासन से पहले ही कहा था कि धारी देवी की मूर्ति को न हटाया जाए इससे उत्तराखंड में प्रलय आ जाएगी क्योंकि धारी देवी ही इन चारों धामों की सुरक्षा करती है। उन्होंने कहा जब आप द्वारपॉल को ही हटा देंगे तो विनाश तो होगा ही। (Nigam 2013)

Uma Bharti said she had already told the city administration and the government well in advance that the statue of Dhārī Devī should not be removed as it is precisely Dhārī Devī who protects the four Dhām and through this the flood would come to Uttarakhand. She had informed them that if they allowed the gatekeeper to be removed, there would certainly be destruction.

परिषद्” (Amar Ujālā 2013, May 11b). “The question of the Dhārī Devī Temple must be settled forever. No matter how much drama the government may put up, it will never be allowed to demolish this temple. Dhārī Devī is the *Kul devī* of the people of Uttarakhand. If the government dares to destroy it, it will face serious consequences.—Ashok Singhal, president of the Vishva Hindu Parishad.”

327 “Bharti said the Central government did not pay attention to the matter and the idol of Dhārī Devī was shifted, which became the cause of the natural disaster” (Hindustan Times 2013, June 24).

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Inherent in her statements about the Devī's anger is a political dimension that is probably part of the BJP's broader strategy in its post-disaster engagement. The Hindustan Times (2013, June 24) discloses the party's ulterior motives:

As Uttarakhand battles its worst disaster in nearly 80 years, the Bharatiya Janata Party, that lost the state narrowly to the Congress in 2012 assembly polls, has pressed its Uttar Pradesh unit to assist in relief operations besides getting its UP MLAs to commit a month's salary for disaster management. [. . .] UP BJP chief Laxmikant Bajpai says he expects nearly 6–7 truck loads of relief material besides cash for the rain ravaged hill state from UP's Awadh (that comprises Lucknow) region alone. [. . .] The idea clearly is to hardsell BJP as a party that cares for the nation and rises above party considerations on such issues. It, says a source, is also to expose the "inept" handling of the post disaster scene by the Congress government in Uttarakhand (Hindustan Times 2013, June 24).

Uma Bharti's remarks about Dhārī Devī must therefore be understood in the context of the BJP's recent defeat in the 2012 state elections and the party's attempt to regain political ground in Uttarakhand. Party members as Bharti thus extend their political campaign not only to disaster relief, but also by framing the case of Goddess Dhārī as an indictment of the Congress government for provoking the destruction of the state through its mismanagement. A crucial part of the poor governance, from the BJP's angle, was the Congress's support for the development project in Srinagar and the relocation of the temple. This means that U. Bharti's rhetoric on the Goddess and the flood, like Ashok Singhal's, is permeated by the struggle between the two Indian major parties over their contested territory.

Besides her initial propagation of the religious disaster reading, Bharti was politically active on other fronts after the disaster as well. In a widely publicised press conference, she reported about her meeting with President Pranab Mukherjee in Delhi. Their conversation is understood to have been about reconsidering "development related projects in the mountain region" in the post-disaster phase (Webdunia, 2013, June 22). With the effects of the flood still fresh, the moment seemed favourable as a potential turning point to "promote an alternative vision of development in the mountain region" (ibid.). This indeed sounds as if it could be part of a valid ecologically sustainable agenda, if it were not for Bharti's long-standing Hindu national interests.³²⁸ As her motivation is reflected in the priority given to the

328 The entanglements with "Hindutva" are also evident when immediately after the propagation of the temple myth as an issue of national concern, sub-organisations of the

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protection of areas and sites important to Hindu culture, her second demand to the president was the repatriation of the statue of Dhārī Devī to its original place. Precisely in her case, one can see the fluid quality that the narrative of divine retribution possessed. Depending on the audience, Uma Bharti either explicitly or less openly advocated metaphysical reflections on the disaster and thus clearly showed how the myth of Dhārī's rage became the object of political interests and manoeuvres. At a later stage she even distanced herself from her support of this narrative altogether.³²⁹

Other religious leaders were more restrained and distinct in their adherence to the theory of Dhārī's wrath. For instance, a special broadcast from TV9 Gujarat (2013) made it clear that the religious faction did not uniformly support this interpretation. Although the title of the program was "saints believe movie [*sic*] Dhari Devi idol lead to cloud burst," nonetheless, only one of the saints interviewed (Avimukteshwaranand Saraswati)³³⁰ explicitly supported this theory, while the further respondents presented their very own interpretations of the catastrophe. Swami Chidanand Saraswati runs a large ashram in Rishikesh and is known for his popularity with Western seekers and for the emphasis on ecological awareness. He refers to Dhārī Devī only in general as a manifestation of the *śakti* and in this way equates it with the Ganges. According to Chidanand Saraswati, both of them are part of *śakti*, the female energy manifestation, "Gaṅgā is *śakti* and Dhārī Devī is *śakti*" (TV9 Gujarat 2013).³³¹ He is of the opinion that *vikās* cannot take place in defiance of these female powers and by proclaiming that Gaṅgā should flow freely, he connects the flood to the construction of dam projects and thus anthropogenic

RSS spectrum began to endorse her cause (Hindustan Times 2013, June 28). However, the party members from Uttar Pradesh (or the local newspaper editors) proved to have so little understanding for the case of the Dhārī Devī Temple that they thought to support its reconstruction in Kedarnath. "Akhil Bharatiya Swadesh Sangh members along with members of various organisations reached the bungalow of Uma Bharti at Shyamla Hills on Thursday to extend support for reconstructing Dhari Devi Mandir in Kedarnath" (Hindustan Times 2013, June 28).

329 Her following explanation gives a reason for this move, "उमा ने कहा कि केदारनाथ मंदिर [*sic*] में आपदा मंदिर को शिफ्ट करने के कारण नहीं आई। कहा कि कोई मां अपने लाडलों की जान नहीं लेती।" (Amar Ujālā 2014, Jan. 28). "Uma said that the disaster in Kedarnath did not occur because of the shifting of the temple. She said that no mother is taking the lives of her dear children."

330 Swami Avimukteshwaranand is the official representative of Shankaracharya Swami Swaropanand Saraswati (Nawaz 2018).

331 "गंगा भी शक्ति है, धारी देवी भी शक्ति है। गंगा की धारा या धारी देवी दोनों शक्तियां हैं। इन दोनों शक्तियों के सामने हमें अपना विकास करना है, लेकिन विकास ऐसा नहीं करना है कि धारी देवी को भूल जाए, विकास ऐसा नहीं करना है कि गंगा की पवित्रता धारा को भूल जाए।" (TV9 Gujarat 2013: 01 : 29 min.). "Gaṅgā is also *śakti*, Dhārī Devī is also *śakti*. The flow of the Ganges or Dhārī Devī they are both *śakti*. We have to do our development by taking into account these two *śaktis*. However, development cannot be done by disregarding Dhārī Devī; development cannot be done by neglecting the sacred flow of the Ganges."

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causes in the mountains. By saying “प्रकृति के साथ छेड़छाड़ न हो” (TV9 Gujarat 2013: 01 : 36 min.), “one should not meddle with nature,” he ambiguously suggests that nature has taken revenge for the rampant construction in the mountain region and since nature and Dhārī Devī both are *śakti*, one could read into it that the retribution of Dhārī Devī forms part of the reprisal of nature/*śakti*, yet he does not openly support this chain of association.

[. . .] जगद्गुरु ने कहा कि धारीदेवी को विस्थापित करना इस आपदा का कारण बना। साथ ही कई प्रकार की परियोजनाएं विकास के लिए चलाई जा रही हैं जो उत्तराखंड के विनाश का माध्यम बन गई हैं। (Amar Ujalā 2013, June 8)

The Jagadguru said that displacing Dhārī Devī was the cause for this disaster. Moreover, many types of projects are carried out for the sake of development, a process that has become the means of destruction for Uttarakhand.

The Shankaracharya Swaroopanand Saraswati, as another dominant spiritual leader, commented on the Dhārī Devī narrative. Although the Shankaracharya at the beginning of the above quote blames the relocation of Dhārī Devī as the reason for the recent catastrophe, he expands and generalises his argumentation in the next line: the various types of projects built under the premise of *vikās* were the root cause of the destruction in Uttarakhand. The raising of the Dhārī Devī statue and its further impact hence symbolises only one of the manifestations of “*vikās-vināś*”³³² that continuously take place (are implemented?) in the mountain region. As named before, the construction of roads and hotels, but also the behaviour of people in venerated places fall under the offences that undermine the sacredness of the mountain region.³³³ This is also meant to express that pilgrims’ behaviour has changed considerably compared to the past, as the concept of pilgrimage has gradually changed to include more and more characteristics that would fall within the conceptual framework of tourism. Whereas the Shankaracharya thus endorsed the narrative of the enraged Devī, this idea slowly recedes into the background in view of all the other signs of destruction in the mountains. One reason for his less supportive stance in this matter could be his traditionally established affiliation with the Congress Party. Since Ashok Singhal’s speech had transformed the tale of Dhārī Devī’s wrath into an open indictment of the Congress regime, this could

332 The combination of these two words is a catchy and often used pun, since the Hindi terms for development—*vikās*—and destruction—*vināś*—exhibit phonetic similarity.

333 Alcohol consumption, honeymooning couples and meat consumption are the commonly cited reasons, see the purohit of Kedarnath in 5.2.4.

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be another motive for favouring alternative readings of the catastrophe. His stance may nonetheless have been fed by the wider developments, as after the flood a conflict broke out between different religious camps about the future of the worship towards “Baba Kedār” (the presiding deity in Kedarnath) (Amar Ujālā 2013, July 1b). This may have led to his focus being more on the Kedar region.³³⁴

As the investigation showed, the discourse within the religious and religious-political spectrum evolved in a multifaceted way. There was a variety of perspectives on the disaster from faith-based actors, some of whom supported the Dhārī version, while others expressed their own more nuanced ideas. These individual opinions simultaneously appeared coupled with—and allowed insights into—the featured person’s social standing and political agenda. The image painted by the news sources, however, was an affirmation of the most extreme voices of the right-wing ideologues. Although the engagement of these actors came first, it was then supported by the media which generalised, actively promoted and foregrounded their message. In this process of news preparation and dissemination, two of the principles of media transmission in particular came to the fore, firstly the requirement to produce a sensational, attention-grabbing story and secondly, as discussed at the beginning, a tendency to spread the message of the fundamentalist spectrum (Thomas 2008). The first point also follows the finding of Giri and Vats (2018) that the coverage of the disaster in Uttarakhand was characterised by a concentration on sensational maxima. Due to such mechanisms, Hindu nationalist conceptions dominated the discourse in the wake of the Uttarakhand catastrophe and managed to “control the social production of meaning” (Button 2002:146)—that is, the religious angle of it. What thus persists in the public mind is the narrative of the Goddess’s wrath, the most extreme and spectacular interpretation, which was apparently pushed by the various media channels and favoured by Hindu right-wing forces.

334 The ramified political controversies following the flood became apparent at one point when the Shankaracharya was held directly responsible for the catastrophe. In July 2013, a delegation of the VHP, led by the district chairman Premballabh Naithany, filed a complaint against the spiritual leader at a police station in Srinagar. The reason given was that he caused the catastrophe by setting up a crystal *liṅga* in Kedarnath. They argued that the “*svayambhū*” *liṅga* already existed in this place, while religious laws forbid the establishment of a second lingam. The Shankaracharya accordingly disrupted the cosmological order of the pilgrimage site, the *tīrtha*, and thereby triggered the catastrophe (Amar Ujālā 2013, July 30).

5.2.8 The Flood of 2013, Summary and Conclusion

The subchapters dealing with the 2013 flood disaster in Uttarakhand and the interpretation of the catastrophe revealed the multiple agendas as well as mechanisms behind this reading of the catastrophe. They exposed the dynamics that managed to turn the story about a goddess and her divine intervention into a nation-wide adopted flood myth. The multi-layered entanglements of interests comprised religiously tinged expectations of the public in conjunction with a sacred landscape, patterns of action that determine organisations, political power relations and not least general and temporary geophysical conditions. The media, however, were not only one of the main drivers in the production of the flood accounts, but also the central connector to the agenda of the other actors.

To conclude, another look at the agency of the Goddess. The role of the deity, as it is evident in the flood myth, appears more powerful than ever. Yet, despite her dominant position in the flood, the perceived extent of her agency is debatable and requires differentiated reflection. Already in the light of the flood 2012 (Chapter 4), the change of identity of the Goddess was pointed out with her relocation to the platform and her inclusion into the hydroscape. Both of these most recent flood events share some elements with the historical floods, for they all either swept her away or threatened to do so and then entailed a transformation of ideas about the Goddess. Judging from the circumstances how the statue was shifted in 2013 in order to save it from the flood, the deity emerges devoid of agency, or rather as in 2012, solely displayed a victimised agency in need of an urgent rescue operation (see Chapter 5.2.4; also 4.2.4). This event as reflected in her immediate surroundings, was flanked by according narratives of danger and salvation. Her rescue to the new concrete platform meant not only that she had transformed into a sacralised feature of the hydroscape, but also visibly, that her nature as Goddess of the river and of its floods no longer existed. Saved from the floods, her interaction with the river and also with the rock on which she had previously resided came to an end. As mentioned earlier, Strang and Krause argue that concepts of living water, when they fall under developmental projects, are appropriated by such enterprises and are inclined to forfeit their non-human agency (2013:101). Here it is evident that elements closely associated with the river, such as in this case a river goddess, suffer the same fate.

As for the identity of the Goddess—although so all-encompassingly represented as local, the deity apparently transcended her local identity throughout the discourse unfolding after the disaster. Representations of her agency in the flood made her to become part of a national flood memory. The picture of an avenging goddess turned into a means for the national public to deal with the catastrophe mentally and emotionally, but also to reaffirm and uphold the cherished image of Uttarakhand. Goddess Dhārī thus became instrumental in a national disaster

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coping strategy. At the same time, she turned into a vehicle for Hindu national political efforts and the image promoted by these actors of the sacralized region, together with their ideological exploitation of this very image for their own political ends. Even if the reading of her identity as an avenging goddess was widely accepted among the inhabitants of the region, the cessation of her direct interaction with the environment and the flood during this period was also accompanied by the loss of her local character. Not only was she severed from a more sensory flood experience, but also from her earlier grown image that had been created at the local level. Incorporated into an artificially built land- and waterscape, the Goddess is saved from nature's whims. Elevated on the concrete platform, she is estranged from her natural surroundings, though it was precisely the exchange with the environment that was considered one of her key attributes and those of local deities in general (cf. Chapter 2). The connection between the Goddess and the flood, reproduced in the subsequent disaster reading, remained an impersonal, artificial and distant association. Such a conception failed to bridge the gap between her and her environment and rather served to confirm or reflect it. Her proximity to the forces of nature, revived in the narratives of divine retribution, resembles a local narrative, but is as distant and abstract as the spatial distance of the two places it encompasses (Kaliyasaur and Kedarnath). In earlier representations of the Goddess, she appeared as a companion of the floods, closely interwoven with these periodic events. Portrayals of this interplay always bore the typical, assigned characteristics of the deity and involved the society associated with her. The interpretation of her agency in 2013, however, unfolded largely detached from this context and exhibited an arbitrary nature that reflected how decoupled the story and its (co-)creators were from local conditions and identities. A direct example for this modification of the earlier qualities in the narratives about the deity is not only that the Goddess in former flood accounts did not appear as an avenging deity, but rather showed tender and caring traits towards her worshippers. Similarly, the implicit agency of the flood is presented as a given expression of the river and not as a retaliation against the human world or to revenge the violation of culturally defined moral standards. This is, of course, a complex issue and such representations may only be valid for this one location under study. As has been mentioned elsewhere, there are also accounts of floods as a cultural corrective in the mountain region (Chapter 3.3). Nevertheless, such transformed understanding of flood events may also be indicative of the general change in the perception of disasters, which some argue has led to a contemporary "inflated sense of disaster consciousness" (Furedi 2007:486).

Eventually, the relation of the Goddess to floods depicts the state of the human-environment relationship in this area. As the understanding of the Goddess as part of the river, of the elements and disasters has evolved into a deity who is now distanced and alienated from her natural surroundings, she again

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became a symbol of the local people's experience, similar to the 2012 flood. This population is, for one, now deprived of its interaction with the river, after having become part of the hydroscape with the river's transformation into a lake, and for another, in the midst of such a large-scale disaster, people still find themselves threatened by a flood. This means that just as the local population remains cut off from their river in a hydroscape where external elements took over the management of their environment (Baghel & Nüsser 2010; Baghel 2014), so external forces even usurped the interpretation of the flood and recreated the relationship between flood and Goddess on their own terms. In this reinterpretation of her nature by external actors, she is supposed to be the cause of a flood elsewhere. At the same time, the orientation of the regional population also shifted to these external information factors instead of drawing from the unmediated experience of the river, which would have led to the creation of their own, more personalised narratives.

