

6 The Narrative of the Goddess

Disaster Research and concluding Thoughts

A question that remains to be answered regarding this study of floods and concerning the narrative of Dhārī Devī and her alleged role in the Kedarnath disaster—what is the contribution of this present examination to the field of disaster research? The investigation has traced the trajectory of conceptions of the river and of flood events in a local place in the Himalayas. This was done with a focus on the location’s central place of religious worship by exploring the nature of the site’s transitions and the accompanying flood interpretations. As authors engaging with historical disaster research often stress the value of the historical angle in understanding how cultural norms influence the reading of “adversity and hazards” (Furedi 2007:486, e.g. Schenk 2017), this thesis by drawing a “genealogy of disaster” revealed the fluctuating perceptions of floods along the history of a temple. In this course, it illustrated how the meaning of flood events underwent several metamorphoses as part of a transforming relationship of a society and its deity to the river. This also facilitated the identification of a variety of local cultural characteristics, as understandings of the watercourse and its extreme events markedly reflected the state of the society being studied and its embeddedness into wider webs of meaning. The selected approach thereby showed how the ideas and narratives about the river and its most extreme manifestations elucidated social processes and cultural understandings of floods. Yet this methodology drew attention also to other, more general trends in societal evolution. Even the earliest histories of the deity’s emergence reflected not only local idiosyncrasies, such as conflicts between the various groups in the village community, but also several other more overarching historical developments. These include the changing representation of female deities of tantric origin over the centuries (see e.g. Michaels 1996, Zeiler 2008), or equally shifting cultural practices in the mountain region in the context of Sanskritisation processes, such as the phasing out of animal sacrifices. Another major aspect was the gradually changing framings of “disaster” or “adversity” (cf. Walter 2010). Floods as a central indicator and the readings of the whims of the river helped to trace all these developments and key social moments. Alongside the gradual shifts, a pivotal turning point for the cultural representation of floods and the identity of the Goddess proved to

6 The Narrative of the Goddess

be the emergence of the hydroelectric project on river Alaknanda. Already at an early stage, it became apparent how the coming into existence of such a project not only revived old caste-based disruptions at the village level, but in its new flare-up transformed the ancient narratives into new and partly distorted variants. Even though this was already a predominant characteristic in the past, it was precisely from this point on that it became clearly noticeable how politicised and interest-driven the reading of flood events was. A comparable tendency of politicisation continued within the framework of institutionalised evaluation processes. Here an oscillation between questions of movement and stasis unfolded, while the identity of the Goddess and the understandings of the stream gradually widened their discursive range. First they became accessible to a broader public via local media dissemination, then they exerted their impact on legal procedures. In these epistemic reflections on the stream and its surroundings, the significance of the river tended to diminish, while the emphasis shifted towards other, less fluid and more stable material foundations, as well as to practice-based aspects with meaning for the place of worship. Broadly discussed was how, at a later stage, floods and the river's water, as well as understandings regarding sacredness fed into a discourse of Hindu identity. This crystallised the increased meaning of the Goddess and her relation to the watercourse for even broader political and ideological social dynamics. Parallel to that and under the impact of another flood event, the temple's relation to water and the developmental project exhibited all the features of a political environmental discourse, while exposing well-known problematic practices taking place under the paradigm of "development." From that moment on, floods shifted their meaning another time. As they were instrumentalised by hegemonic powers, they not only transitioned from the interpretative to the material level, but later also subverted precepts that came from a belief-based and herein cosmological context. What became clear is that only by breaking down these established and fluctuating relationships between human and non-human actors, could the narrative of "a wrathful deity bringing a flood upon the land" be understood as the last step or culmination point in a whole chain of social developments, causalities and contingencies and as a product of the conflicts of interest of the participating entities.

While this study thus provides a comprehensive picture of the changing patterns of disaster or interpretation of adversity in a given area, it predominantly reveals how and that, especially in the Western Himalayan context, religious readings of disasters, but especially of floods, continue to play an important role. This still applies, even if the aspect of transcendence at a certain stage in the pursuit of these water-based events disappeared from the scene and gave way to a more modern, technocratic and globally informed discourse influenced by issues of dominance and shaped by political-ecological concerns. Although it can be said that in the illuminated socio-cultural context faith-inspired ascriptions of meaning remain

an essential element in coping with a catastrophe,³³⁵ it needs to be noted here that the religious dimension in it is very distinguished from other investigations into this facet. This refers to studies with a focus on more localised perspectives, as e.g. earlier mentioned works by Gergan (2017) and by S. Kumar et al. (2015, see table in Figure 4). The metaphysical angle that emerged in the case under investigation is no longer or only to a small extent locally generated, but proved to be a distorted recurrence, or almost a revenant of a locally produced narrative. The corresponding reading of the catastrophe by broader social strata was again a consequence of the fact that the identity of the temple had transgressed its local significance with the construction of the HEPP. What can be deduced from this is the following. While it was clearly dynamics associated with the implementation of a development project that led to the later religiously infused flood interpretations, the central factor behind conflicting ideas on how to deal with the watercourse and the ensuing disaster reading was the presence of the imagined sacred space surrounding the mountain region. Belief-based notions about the region not only had a determining effect on the environmental conflict before the disaster (as particularly in Chapter 3), but also on interpretation processes post-disaster. Initially the conception of the 2013 disaster formed an extension of the preceding debate, which unfolded around the Goddess's relocation and which was already imbued with ideas pointing to the sacred space imaginary. This imaginary constituted also the very reason why there was an interest and intervention of the respective actors in the pre- and post-disaster discourse. Beyond that, involved concepts of a homogenous, trans-regional as well as religiously tinged perception of the mountain space exerted their influence in several more ways on the general dynamics of the catastrophe. In the first place, ideas about the sacredness of the landscape already determined the region's vulnerability due to the massive presence of people on a spiritual journey and the unplanned development which had occurred for this end. Subsequently notions of a particular space affected the response to the disaster, as visible for example in the form of a concentration on the domestic tourists in relief operations (Gusain & Datt 2013), and finally they exerted their influence on a certain strand of the ensuing interpretation of the catastrophe.

As the region's distinct and unique meaning is clearly an endemic feature in its unique combination of supporting elements in the form of a mountainous landscape or geophysical conditions, scriptural framings and longstanding pilgrimage practices, it stands out from all other areas whose importance is, for instance, of a purely tourist nature. This applies even if spiritual and leisure tourism often

335 On the other hand, it remains to be seriously considered that the flood events of the previous year were clearly seen in connection with the construction of the hydroelectric power plant and that blame was almost exclusively placed on the executing company and state authorities.

6 The Narrative of the Goddess

and in many ways intersect and cannot be clearly demarcated from one another (see Thomases 2019). Nonetheless, due to the strong identification of the public with the area, the collective cognitive and emotional processing of the catastrophe in 2013 also remained oriented towards- and took place in line with the existing image of the region. This understanding further implies that previous academic knowledge gained in connection with disasters in other, or in explicit tourist areas, has only limited validity here (see Rosselló et al. 2020; Cró & Martins 2017). The public's interest in a region is more flexible if it is a tourist destination and tourist flows can more easily switch to alternative places.³³⁶ But for a destination with a long-established identity, as is the case with the *dev bhūmi*, this is rather unlikely. The India-wide attribution of meaning to the region proved so dominant that in the 2013 disaster, it helped to form a leading narrative that overrode all other possible, i.e. locally generated and more diverse, flood stories. The emergence of different narratives though would have revealed more about a local, spatially limited and individualised flood experience. The key finding of the analysis of the conception of divine retribution, therefore, was the great dominance and importance of a collectively “imagined space” in the assessment of a catastrophe. What this further suggests is that disaster research must inevitably recognise and take into account the specifics of causal attributions of meaning for a particular area or a region, as they exist in the area studied.

Since the 2013 tale of divine retaliation for the unsuspecting observer could easily have been mistaken as an authentic and regionally generated narrative, this leads to the broader question: How then to deal adequately with an academic interest in local disaster perception in the Indian Western Himalayas? The investigative process conducted here highlighted why the metaphysical reading of the catastrophic event in 2013, with its particular mechanisms and the role of the actors involved, actually exhibits very few characteristics that can be classified as distinctly local. This is still broadly valid, despite the fact that the analysis simultaneously brought to light some responses to the disaster that seemed to reflect more direct dynamics of the mountain society under consideration. Research today, first of all, must continually challenge the question of the extent to which it is still possible to identify distinct characteristics of local cultures in an ever more globalised world and with societies that are increasingly connected via digital communication facilities. In this sense, the overall post-disaster discourse revealed a “local culture” in that it paints a picture of a rapidly and progressively changing rural society. What has been evidenced is that in places as these, too, the local population participates in contemporary information flows and is just as much a part of mass media discourses

336 For comparison, take mountain regions like Himachal Pradesh and Kashmir. These not only have a very different identity construction, but also exert a much more secular tourist draw.

and other digital networking and communication practices as large sections of the Indian population are today. Against this backdrop, the narrative of Dhārī Devī's wrath shows a local dimension in the form that media induced exchange processes do not exempt this region, or seemingly remote places in the Himalayas. Research that seeks to identify a more spatially limited view on a catastrophe is evidently required to be aware of the pitfalls of a narrative as exposed in this case. With regard to future research in pursuance of an understanding for local readings of disaster, I am still convinced that a thorough investigation in parts of Uttarakhand with direct interaction and through interviews with the local population and especially in rural places rather off the pilgrimage tracks, would paint a different or more diverse picture of a disaster response, evaluation- and interpretation. A study of this kind, however, will have to limit the scope of contributing factors or participating actors. For one, it should be conducted in a locality that is less subject to a transnational sphere of imaginary, in other words, less influenced by the presence or flow of a national religious tourism. For another, such a location should also not be marked by dominant developmental-based predecessor conflicts, or more generally by any kind of large-scale technological undertaking. Such an investigation would be additionally recommended in the event of a smaller disaster, which does not generate such overwhelming coverage in the national media and an accompanying high level of national public attention.

6.1 Epilogue

This point now turns to some more general considerations about the identity of floods. Among a paradigm of control of the natural environment as implied by the various developmental projects in the mountain region, the 2013 flood, at least for a short moment in time and as disasters do quite generally, shattered prevailing concepts that indicate the controllability of hazard risks (see Williams 2008). This constituted a dramatic antithesis to the framing of the flood events in 2012, where it seemed that the strict regulation of the waterscape around Srinagar had subjugated, the river anyway, but also floods to serve human, or in this case rather corporate purposes. As opposed to this, time and again it became evident that the river together with its floods had retained its agency, albeit under different conditions. Baghel (2014) elaborated on how a river still adheres to its own nature and maintains its capacity to effect, even in the face of various engineered controlling projects.

Contrary to governmental perceptions or the ultimate engineering objective of a completely controlled river, the river itself has agency, and the new river control structures simply alter the

6 The Narrative of the Goddess

expression of this agency, without removing it. So, in case of flood control embankments, the river is not a passive recipient of engineering interventions, and in the newly created hydrosapes, it behaves differently from earlier slow onset of floods to the new form of breach flooding. The new form of flooding due to erosion of the embankments is not a product of engineers or of local people or relations of knowledge and instead can only represent the agency of the river in creating a new form of expression for itself. (Baghel 2014:18)

This observation assumes importance with regard to contemporary disaster thought and at the same time highlights the shortcomings of the paradigm underlying it. Evidently, in vulnerability approaches and mitigation discourses, a “misplaced faith” comes to the fore, to the point of a “presumed infallibility” in the capabilities of organisations. These in turn tend to present risks among the evolution of disaster knowledge “as more manageable and acceptable” (Williams 2008:1117). Research on disasters and institutions involved in disaster management are constantly accumulating new knowledge to improve strategies for dealing with such events, both in theory and in practice. Yet these bodies are confronted with a large proportion of, or even increasing, uncertainty and constant setbacks (Williams 2008:1120). Mega-disasters are immensely complex phenomena and their interplay of various factors is accompanied by a high degree of ambiguity, that Williams refers to as “not knowing” (2008:1129) or “non-knowledge” (2008:1130). More precisely this indicates “the limits to modern knowledge” (2008:1130) about disasters. While this unknowingness in connection with catastrophes is a factor to be acknowledged on the one hand, this very understanding comes in tandem with a call for a „a lessening of scientific arrogance and technological hubris” (Williams 2008:1130). Indeed, the sheer scale of the Uttarakhand disaster, consisting of unique, unprecedented and unpredictable meteorological triggers and correspondingly largely unimaginable dramatic physical impacts, would have been difficult to envisage in foresight. Now, the story of divine intervention, apart from its agenda-driven propagation, could also be seen as a sign or recognition of the inconceivability and “unknowingness” and the persistently limited scope of control in the face of a catastrophe. In this sense, the divine may serve to fill the gaps that delimit the boundaries of human knowledge.³³⁷

337 This is noteworthy in view of the fact that modern accounts dealing with the “wrath of nature” are also regarded as an advancement or a modern version of the theory of divine retribution, and that moreover a renaissance of this theological pattern of interpretation is attested (cf. Walter 2010). The metaphysical, in a way, steps into the gap or the empty space created by these not yet (or never) understood dynamics.

There was still a subsequent and problematic development in relation to this broader understanding, which attributes disasters to a large extent to factors that are not yet fully understood or may be beyond human comprehension, and this is worth mentioning here. The idea of the flood as an expression of divine agency took another curious twist in the aftermath of the 2013 flood event in Srinagar. Here it was the dam building company that took recourse to this form of reasoning in a later court case regarding compensation for the damage caused by the flood wave that hit the lower reaches of the city (see also Chapter 5.1.2). In yet another act of instrumentalising floods, the Alaknanda Hydro Power Co Ltd denied any responsibility for the destruction that took place after the gates of the dam had been opened, claiming that the inundation was caused by divine forces. The corporation openly argued that the flood was beyond their accountability since it was a “divine” flood.³³⁸ This form of declaration actually corresponds to a kind of observed standard mechanism of government agencies and involved companies. By seeking to naturalise a disaster, or similarly as in the present case, to attribute it to divine bodies, the attempt is made to evade liability for damages incurred. Looking at technological disasters, Button elucidates this strategy employed by government and corporate entities, “the response to disaster is depicted as a valiant and often vain struggle with Mother Nature, a scenario that places much responsibility outside of human control” (2002:154). In addition to formulating the disaster in this way, spokespersons for the company also touted the dam as a safety feature that had protected the rest of the city from flooding. Nevertheless, the court rejected this kind of justification and ordered AHPCL to pay a large amount of compensation to the citizens of Srinagar, citing “the improper waste disposal of the project” (Tripathi 2016) as the main cause of the damage inflicted on the town.

As a final note—the temporal ascension of Goddess Dhārī to a deity of national importance and a symbol of the 2013 “Himalayan tsunami” was then followed by a shrinking back of her inflated significance into her more locally known form. The long-term effects for Goddess and temple, however, can be considered quite favourable. Her status as a symbol of the 2013 flood had increased her fame and assumed “potency,” which eventually translated into higher visitor numbers to the Dhārī Devī Temple. Moreover, with the ebbing of the flood discourse, and equally with the waning of media and national public attention to the temple site, it seems that over time also this “alien” or “external” and imposed upon flood narrative was re-appropriated to the local level. The understanding of the impact of Dhārī’s

338 In this context, the company just spoke of the general divine and not Dhārī’s rage, since this would have allowed conclusions to the company’s own action—i.e. the Goddess being enraged about her relocation. Yet even if they did not include the Goddess into their flood narrative, perhaps only speculations about her agency contributed to the general idea that the divine had its share in the flood in one form or another.

6 The Narrative of the Goddess



Figure 18. The new Dhārī Devī Temple (Khandige 2021).

rage in Kedarnath thereby became a commonly shared story to and among the temple visitors. It clearly remains a living temple, now enriched by yet another flood narrative. And even though it bears this unusual and perhaps aesthetically questionable form, being built on a concrete platform (Figure 18), it still attracts the local audiences for its rhythm-bound and traditional ritual performances.