

Nature's *Tandava* Dance

As a society we are not 100 percent blameless. Now the rivers are saying that we are more powerful than your government, your planning commissions, your real estate agents, and your contractors.

—SHEKHAR PATHAK (2013)

After I visited Kedarnath at the beginning of the season in 2014, it became clear to me that to understand reactions to the disaster (Hindi: *apda*) both inside and outside Uttarakhand it was necessary to understand the longer story of how, in discourses about and experiences of the complex eco-social system of Kedarnath, the following entities came to be experienced as enmeshed with each other: nature (Hindi: *prakriti*), Shiva-Shakti, and development (Hindi: *vikas*).¹ This chapter offers a set of vignettes that illustrate how this emergent enmeshing looked and felt in and around Kedarnath at the beginning of the season in 2014 and examines, building on the earlier chapters in the story of this place, how the persistently patterned enmeshing of Shiva-Shakti (particularly in Kedarnath) and local divine powers with different understandings of *prakriti* and *vikas* colored and created the conditions for these recent configurations. The complex interrelationships of humans, the divine, and the natural were deeply embedded in outrage and guilt about how recent policies relating to development and commercial infrastructure regulation as well as personal business decisions exacerbated the impact of the disaster in Uttarakhand and its immediate aftermath.² Pursuant to the broader aims of this book, my primary goal in this chapter is to situate Kedarnath at the beginning of the season in 2014 within the longer eco-social story of the place and the region and to give the reader a sense of experiential weight of all these forces as they combined and interconnected in Kedarnath.

Part of this longer story is the story of an at first gradual and then rapidly intensifying set of conditions through which Garhwalis, and those visiting Dev Bhumi, experienced themselves as suddenly vulnerable, or perhaps more precisely *vulnerable in a different way* than they had been in recent memory because their

practices of living, building, and working were changing in a way that was out of step with the landscape. This approach to the *apda* in Kedarnath is consonant with the idea, characteristic of disaster studies since the 1980s, that what are often termed natural disasters (or sometimes “natural hazards”) should be understood as events that reveal underlying, typically anthropogenic dissonances between particular populations and their environments that have arisen over time rather than sudden, surprising acts of ambush by the natural world (Gaillard and Texier 2010; Hewitt 1983; Oliver-Smith 1999a; Oliver-Smith 1999b). Further, the effect of a disaster on humans depends on the social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, and material contexts in which the disaster occurs. Specific people or groups, because of these factors, become more “vulnerable” to environmental events and experience the same event differently. As Michelle Gamburd (2012, 37) puts it, “Exploitative social structures that predate the event create conditions where certain groups suffer more during a natural hazard and have less capacity afterwards to recover.”

In many Himalayan contexts, the incidence of floods and landslides has been increasing during the second half of the twentieth century, in part because of ill-planned construction of roads (such as the extension of the Kedarnath valley road beyond Guptkashi) connected to the Sino-Indian War in 1962 (Ives 2004, 93–95). In *Himalayan Perceptions*, a work summarizing decades of scholarship on Himalayan geology and environmental science first published in 2004, Jack Ives (2004, 118) wrote that “human interventions on the mountain environment frequently exacerbate pre-existing slope instabilities thereby accentuating vulnerability to mountain hazards.”³ *Mountain hazard* was a term coined in place of the more common *natural hazard* to emphasize specifically the way that “catastrophic processes” in the Himalaya, particularly glacial lake outburst floods (GLOFs) and landslides, were “augmented by human interventions on the landscape,” especially the sorts of interventions created by “the continued expansion of modern infrastructure into a mountain system that only a few decades ago was isolated from world events” (Ives 2004, 133). These broad trends were explicitly connected to the increasing levels of “trekking tourism,” whose impacts, in the Uttarakhand context, we can imagine would be similar to those of *yatra* tourism (Ives 2004, 140–41). Furthermore, GLOF events were known to “occasionally occur ‘out-of-season’; for instance, after the assumed end of a monsoon season or prior to its onset” (Ives 2004, 135). This summary closely describes the Chorabari Tal flood event. In other words, anyone involved with mountain tourism in Garhwal could have looked at the Kedarnath situation and seen the terrible possibility that Kedarnath would eventually fit into these larger patterns. The floods of 2013 laid bare the failure of recent development trajectories and state governance because the floods and landslides themselves were not out of character for the region. It was the level of destruction caused in 2013 that was uncommon, along with the

intensity of the rainfall and flow of water (H. Joshi 2016, 126–32). But much of the impact of this event was clearly and unsurprisingly human caused.

The fact that the state and central governments could have been far better prepared for the floods themselves and their multilayered aftermath was experienced as a deep betrayal of the public interest. The felt experience of this betrayal was vastly different for visitors and for Uttarakhandis. For visitors, the majority of whom were Indian, this stood as the latest in a series of recent disasters in India such as Cyclone Phailin (1999), the earthquake of Gujarat (2001), and the Indian Ocean Tsunami of 2004 that prompted the passage of the Disaster Management Act of 2005 and the creation of the National Disaster Management Authority. Flooding in Kashmir, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh joined this list in 2014, and in 2015 the area in and around Kathmandu in neighboring Nepal experienced a devastating earthquake. The creation of this authority had been overdue—South Asia has seen dozens of disastrous events produced by floods, earthquakes, storms, and tsunamis just since the mid-twentieth century (Feener and Daly 2016, 14–21). Furthermore, in 2005, in part because of the massive impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, many Asian countries had become signatories to the Hyogo Framework, a “10-year plan to make the world safer from natural hazards” (UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction 2007; Feener and Daly 2016, 25). Given these conditions, a modern twenty-first-century nation-state should have been able to provide advance warning of events like this and should have been prepared to hit the ground running in the aftermath, particularly in a region that had come to base significant parts of its identity and economy on different forms of mountain tourism.⁴ Further, it should have included the inevitability of such events in its long-term planning. This did not happen in Uttarakhand in 2013. In the early twenty-first century the Uttarakhand Char Dham Yatra was beginning to feel modern and safe—a Himalayan family vacation that connected people with their traditional religious values and obligations. The region succumbed to one of the implied, and sometimes false, promises of modern built environments—that they can promise unnatural safety and predictability.⁵ These floods, as journalist Shankar Aiyar (2012) has observed about disastrous events more generally in India, became a moment when the flaws of the nation-state became visible to all. Aiyar argues that in India these moments often have served as a catalyst for change.⁶

For Uttarakhandis the sense of betrayal and anger went deeper. The character and degree of recent infrastructure development in Uttarakhand exacerbated the death and destruction caused by these flood and landslide events. Coupled with the way that the plight of *yatris* immediately after the flooding received much more attention than the situation of locals, the situation felt like a betrayal of the ideals of sustainable, alternative development that had led to the establishment of the state of Uttarakhand. Shortcomings of the state's relief efforts further deepened this waking resentment. Thus, both inside and outside Uttarakhand, the progress

of the state in finding a way through the monsoon and out of the disaster quickly came to function as an extraordinarily freighted, unavoidably public set of conversations about proper forms of development taking place at the collision of the ideal and the possible. On June 20, 2013, I stumbled upon a Facebook posting that captures this sentiment:

Friends, you should know how it feels to be close to death. What it was like to have everything taken away on the sixteenth of this month, you should know this. On the morning after that night, the additional difficulties that happened to me, you should know this. On that dark night I was just praying to God [Hindi: *Bhagwan*] to never show that kind of night again. On the seventeenth it felt as if perhaps I would never get *darshan* of the sun again. In the entire Kedarnath valley ten or fifteen thousand people are missing, and *harv* rupees of goods have been scattered to the winds. People are trapped in one place. This is all happening because of dams—the glaciers became spoiled [Hindi: *kaccha*] from the digging of tunnels in the mountains. That is what happened in Kedarnath—a glacier broke Chorabari Tal, and from this far too many lives and much prosperity died. [The following switches to English] We have to protest the construction of Dams in Uttar[a]khand otherwise we have to be ready for this type of calamities again and again in Future.⁷

What I found notable about this wrenching comment is the decisive equation of the flooding with the building of dams and tunnels, written by someone who (presumably) less than three days before had been standing in Kedarnath. There is no uncertainty here. There is quick, furious certainty about a tragedy whose causes were, to this writer, already apparent within days of the flooding. On June 20, 2013, Shekhar Pathak, an Uttarakhandi historian and well-known public intellectual and environmental activist, offered an expanded and informed, yet no less passionate, critique:

Twelve years earlier in Uttarakhand the building of roads, digging, sand extraction, electricity projects, etc. happened so fast, and in such an abnormal way, that the rivers decided to assume their dreadful manifestation. . . . They cast their vote about the current development prototype in which rivers are interfered with by dams, and tunnels are dug through mountains for the sake of electricity. Society repeatedly regarded the great government with hope, but in recent years the in-charge governments did not look at their own natural environment in a perceptive way. And society's members also interfered with the rivers everywhere, building hotels everywhere so that their own economic situation would improve. As a society we are not 100 percent blameless. Now the rivers are saying that we are more powerful than your government, your planning commissions, your real estate agents, and your contractors.

On June 25, 2013, Ravi Chopra wrote an editorial for the *Hindu*, entitled “The Untold Story from Uttarakhand,” protesting the absence of any sort of public concern for the situation of Uttarakhandis themselves.

While the focus is on pilgrims, nobody is talking about the fate of boys and men who came from their villages in the Mandakini valley to earn during the yatri season. . . . Last week's disaster not only spelt doom for thousands of household economies but also dealt a grievous blow to Uttarakhand's lucrative religious tourism industry. With the media focus almost exclusively on the fate of pilgrims, the scenes of the deluge and its aftermath will linger on in public memory, making the revival of tourism doubtful in the foreseeable future. The abject failure of the State government, political leaders and the administration is therefore likely to impoverish the State coffers too.

Journalist Hridayesh Joshi, one of the first observers to reach Kedarnath after the floods, wrote an entire book about the Kedarnath floods that has subsequently been translated into English (H. Joshi 2014, 2016). His carefully researched reports offer a trenchant summary of the governance failures:

Two months after the disaster, a senior IPS officer involved in relief work in the Kedar valley told me: "We were not at all prepared for an emergency like this. In such a critical situation, we worked very slowly. . . . We were also thoroughly inefficient. No one had any idea what to do. Trouble had started on 15 June itself. . . . Major destruction followed on 16 and 17 June . . . but till 19 June we were sitting around, twiddling our thumbs." . . . There was an inordinate delay in pressing in the army and the air force into action, resulting in a tremendous loss of lives. However, once the army and the air force began rescuing people, there was a visible improvement in the situation and it is largely due to this reason that many lives were saved. (H. Joshi 2016, 98)

There is a sense of outraged critique present in these pieces that both expresses and describes a fundamentally regional sense of betrayal. Uttarakhand was intended to be a new state that, in a departure from the recent history of the region, would value the long-term needs of its residents and the health of the environment over and above what would benefit or make sense to those outside the state. Many of the problems that exacerbated the unavoidable destruction caused by this event reawoke long-standing resentment about the ways in which first colonial and later postcolonial political and economic structures systematically exploited the natural resources and labor of mountain (Hindi: *pahari*) people. But there was a new tone here as well. The mismanagement of *yatra* tourism and connected infrastructure projects was a new addition to this set of regional grievances that, given the state of preexisting knowledge about sustainable mountain tourism, could easily have been avoided. This is a key point for understanding what led up to the floods of 2013—that the new practices and infrastructure supporting *yatra* tourism were in important ways continuations of older patterns in the region formed through the intersections of colonialism, globalization, and specific visions of development. Resentment against *yatra* tourism was not culturally marked in the same way as the building of dams and the cutting of trees. After 2013, however, the older regional *pahari* sentiment fueled this new conflagration as the trauma of betrayal

pulled everything into a tighter focus. The vulnerabilities produced in the aftermath of the floods of 2013, vulnerabilities that yet again disproportionately affected the *paharis*, for whom there was no airlift or rescue from the situation, were in a sense a return to earlier forms of *pahari* resentment that had animated protests against logging and hydroelectric dams. This time, however, the resentment had a more inchoate target—a set of socioeconomic conditions that had encouraged the Garhwali *paharis* connected to *yatra* tourism to invest, build, and act in ways that they themselves knew were a departure from traditional Garhwali lifeways.⁸ The “natural” resources being exploited were not something physical like forests or water but rather something less tangible—the partially commodified power and beauty of the Uttarakhand Himalaya and, in the case of Kedarnath, the added drawing power that came from the place-specific presence of Shiva and Shakti and other resident divine powers.

VISIT TO KEDARNATH

Almost a year after the floods I flew to Delhi. Over several days, using a combination of travel by train, bus, and jeep, I made my way into the Kedarnath valley and caught up with the opening procession in Guptkashi. May 4, 2014, found me struggling up the path from Gaurikund to Kedarnath, the last leg of the procession. The *doli* carrying the traveling form of Kedarnath-Shiva had already passed me and I could not keep up. I spent the last chunk of the ascent, especially from Linchauli onward, in the occasional company of two state government employees whose jobs required that they work in Kedarnath. They were coming to Kedarnath for the first time. One said that he felt a bit scared when he found out he would have to live in Kedarnath for a month. I later met a third state government employee who had survived the *apda*, had come back in October of 2013 with the relief and reconstruction teams, and now found himself here again. He said he was going to ask for a transfer the next day because it was too hard for him to be there. He had survived five days after the floods by staying near the Bhukund Bhairavnath shrine on the upper east side of the valley before being picked up by a helicopter. When he returned to work around a week later his appearance and affect were so different that his coworkers did not recognize him. It turned out that a renunciant (Hindi: *sadhu*) I had met often by the Kedarnath temple who also survived the disaster had fed him milk during those five days. My conversation partners kept waiting for me to catch up because I was moving so slowly, was clearly very tired, and was having difficulty catching my breath. Later they told me they had been a bit worried about me.

I stumbled into what the Garhwal Regional Development Authority (GMVN) publicly terms a prefabricated structure, what I would call a tent. I woke up the next morning too late for the first round of opening ceremonies, which was noted by

one of the young priests employed by the Samiti with whom I had sat and walked in previous years. On the one hand, I felt embarrassed that I did not have the mental fortitude to force myself out of bed earlier. On the other hand, I reminded myself that even making it to Kedarnath had been a great challenge and I simply had to do what I could. I later realized that part of what was going on was probably pent-up shock and grief. At around 6:30 in the morning I went to the temple. The doors had opened earlier for VIPs, but at that time the doors were being formally opened for *darshan* and *puja* for the general public. Rawal Bheemashankar Ling, the guru for Kedarnath *pujaris*, addressed the media as a press of people waited to enter the temple. I could not hear what he said because I was not ready to take my boots off and thus could not enter the temple courtyard. I felt unequal to the moment.

Once the doors had officially opened I got ready to enter the temple myself. I made myself bathe—I borrowed a bucket, stripped down, and did a quick bucket bath in the open air behind a building to the north of the temple in the freezing air. I went inside with the flower that a shopkeeper on the Gaurikund-Kedarnath path had given me to offer in the temple along with a few flowers I had gathered. I felt ashamed because they had become crushed from being in my backpack. In comparison, I had seen a *sadhu* who walked the entire route holding a metal canister of perfectly placed flowers in his hand. The day before I had seen several men walking up the path holding a single unblemished flower in one hand the entire way. When I entered the inner sanctum and came near the *linga* there is only one way to express the moment: I was “overcome with feeling” (Hindi: *bhavuk ho gaya*). A year of pent-up grief came out the moment I touched the *linga*, as if I had been holding my breath for a year without my knowing. After a time a pilgrimage priest gruffly indicated that I needed to conclude my cathartic moment so that others could have their turn. Several Kedarnath locals saw this happening, and now I suppose it is a part of what is known about me.

I spent the day wandering around Kedarnath village—looking, listening, talking. I ate lunch courtesy of the Shree Kedarnath Sewa Mandal, a group that since the floods has made a multiyear commitment to feeding people in Kedarnath. A journalist from West Bengal asked me for a comment. She wanted to know my reaction to the fact that so many people had come to Kedarnath in spite of the tragedy of the previous year. I said I thought people were coming both in spite of the tragedy and also because of it, which nonplussed her. She wanted me to affirm her formulation that Kedarnath today had become a symbol of faith (Hindi: *astha ka prateek*). While I think this sentiment is in many ways descriptively accurate, I felt uncomfortable at being invited to affirm this formulation because I felt that it left out too much about what was happening. What we were seeing was also about economic, political, and social pressures.

I spoke with a *sadhu* I recognized from years past. He told me about how he had survived by sprinting in the direction of Bhukund Bhairavnath in the morning



FIGURE 13. The Kedarnath temple on opening day in 2014.



FIGURE 1.4. A side view of Kedarnath temple on opening day in 2014 with the garlanded *divya shila* just behind the temple and the remnants of the rock-debris-flood leading back up to Chorabari Tal in the background.

after hearing the cries of the dying in the temple all night. The *sadhu* said that Shiva has turned him into a real *sadhu* by destroying all of his possessions. He talked about the numerous corpses that must still be hidden all through the village underneath the rubble. He called Kedarnath a “city of ghosts.” He told me that Mahant Chandragiri, the renunciant who had run a food kitchen at the northern edge of Kedarnath for many years, had died during the first flood event. I watched *yatris* and locals exploring the field of newly strewn boulders by the temple, both photographing and worshipping the gigantic boulder (now termed in Hindi *divya shila*, divine stone) that had miraculously prevented the floods from destroying the temple and was now becoming an object of worship and spectacle in its own right. I looked up the valley side to the north and saw, to my amazement, that some visitors had climbed up past the Bhairavnath shrine and were sledding down the hill. This struck others and myself as quite inappropriate, in several ways. First, it was an example of the kind of irreverent tourism that some people feel may have had something to do with Shiva’s anger, and the hilarity felt out of place. Second, it was not yet appropriate to go near Bhukund Bhairavnath until the official Bhairavnath-*puja* that opened the season, which had not yet happened.

Later that day I had a conversation with an employee of the Uttarakhand Department of Tourism. I asked him whether he thought the government should be thinking about a different kind of tourism. He agreed but noted that the state was so dependent on tourism and it was such a fickle industry that Uttarakhand residents could not practically make the kinds of changes that they might prefer because they needed to make every effort to make things easy for visitors. He also said that although what had happened here had received a disproportionate amount of attention because of the spectacular circumstances and the number of outsiders involved, landslides and floods were a normal part of life in Uttarakhand. By way of example he noted that there had been bad landslides in Ukhimath in 2012. Part of what motivated his comments was that he was from the Uttarkashi area, which had had its own share of tragic floods and landslides, particularly in the aftermath of the construction of the Tehri Dam and most recently after the floods of 2013 (Drew 2014a).⁹ He understood that events in Kedarnath had attracted public (and my) notice but wanted to be clear that for him the events themselves were not unique to Kedarnath or discontinuous with mountain life in Garhwal. He said that the policy makers in Dehra Dun were trying to shift Uttarakhand tourism from being solely Char Dham focused but that it would take time, money, and long-term political will. He mentioned an initiative to turn the lake created by the Tehri Dam into a tourist destination for water sports as an example of what they were hoping to do.

During that day in Kedarnath I found myself struggling between simply giving my own personal sense of shock, loss, fear, and awe full rein and forcing myself back to my responsibilities as a researcher to try and learn as much as possible

while I was actually present in this difficult-to-reach place. In the early afternoon I was sitting in the temple courtyard, whose pristine condition (the result of months of labor that had involved the removal of meters of mud and dozens of dead bodies) was in marked contrast to the snow-covered and mostly ruined condition of the rest of the built environment. This contrast was a telling indication of the *shakti* of the place and, as the local man Shukla-Ji had expressed to me (in the Introduction), of the ways that this *shakti* could be understood as both inherent in the place and a result of human experiences and interactions. The temple and immediate environs looked this way because they had been the focus of postdisaster reconstruction efforts, more so than the rest of Kedarnath. But the temple itself had received this disproportionate amount of attention because it was the point where people felt the importance and power of the place to be centered. Later, I would describe Kedarnath in this way to people in the Kedarnath valley who asked me how the place looked: “Shiva is fine, everything else is in bad shape” (Hindi: *Baba theek hai, baki buri halat*). After saying this I would watch to see if my formulation made sense. Most of the time it seemed to scan and no one corrected or contradicted me. After trying this sentence out a dozen or so times I started letting the second half of the sentence dangle: “Shiva is great. Everything else? . . .” When I did this, several people filled it in in this way: “Shiva is fine. Everything else—useless/without meaning” (Hindi: *Baba theek hai—baki bekar*). While I was in Kedarnath, and afterward, several *Ved-pathis* and *tirth purohits* told me that *yatris* who had been to Kedarnath before would arrive in Kedarnath distraught at the level of ruin, would enter the temple, and would come out proclaiming that inside everything felt the same and that it had been an especially good *darshan*.

A conversation sprang up between myself and several Kedarnath valley locals. One man asked me if I thought Kedarnath could still function as a place on which one could base a livelihood. I became the focus of several intent gazes, each belonging to someone who had himself been in Kedarnath during the flooding, lost loved ones, and survived. I said I thought yes but not the way it had been before. One man said that it was the job of the government to return things to a better version of how they had been. For development (Hindi: *vikas*) to return, the government needed either to rebuild a motor road up to Gaurikund or to extend a road even further to Linchauli (halfway between Kedarnath and Gaurikund, the new midpoint that replaced Rambara on the eastern bank of the Mandakini) so that normal business could be restored. He proclaimed that the more *yatris* came to Kedarnath the more the place was spoiled (Hindi: *bigar jana*). This echoed the most common phrase used as an explanation for the floods that I heard from people in the Kedarnath valley: the floods were, in some way, a result of people “making Kedarnath into a picnic place,” a place with in-room hot water and the option of different regional cuisines, environmental pollution created by thousands of people throwing away one-use plastic raincoats every day and other problems

of sanitation, and relaxed expectations about appropriate behavior. However, the speaker continued by unapologetically (and to me, surprisingly) asserting that a certain degree of interference (Hindi: *cherchar*) with the place was necessary if local people were to survive. At the same time, however, several months after the floods the Geological Survey of India had recommended that nothing be rebuilt in the immediate environs of the Kedarnath temple because of the instability of the ground. Kedarnath pilgrimage priests and business people who were not part of the government but who possessed many powerful political patrons vehemently opposed this recommendation because it struck at the heart of their livelihood and their traditional rights, and they made it known that they would resist the government on this point.

The relationships of specific Kedarnath valley locals to the state and central governments were fraught and complicated at this time. It was the job of the state and central governments to help them, but help of that level necessarily involved regional and national politics, and it became clear that Kedarnath was being drawn further into larger-scale political narratives. For example, Kedarnath was in the process becoming a reconstruction project of national importance that was the special concern of the man who would become the new prime minister, Narendra Modi. Kedarnath has since been included on the list of sites that will be part of the national Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive, or PRASAD (Press Information Bureau 2015). Rahul Gandhi, one of the national faces of the Congress Party, made a trek from near Gaurikund to Kedarnath by foot at the beginning of the 2015 season. On the other hand, Kedarnath pilgrimage priests and local business people were *pahari* Garhwalis who resented the assertion of any kind of control from outside the valley. Kedarnath had become, even relative to other disaster-affected sites in Uttarakhand, a distinctive point of intersection between what Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2003, 21) call the “high modernist projects of the Indian state” and a new, postdisaster iteration of what they term, as discussed in chapter 3, the “regional modernity” of Uttarakhand.¹⁰ Many Kedarnath locals wanted to retain as much autonomy as possible. In this overdetermined arena, issues such as the construction and rebuilding of roads, the regulation of pilgrimage tourism, the construction of commercial and private buildings, and the control of space were intensely symbolic and intensely contested (Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan 2006, 9; Coleman and Eade 2004; Coleman 2002; Eade and Sallnow 1991). Brian Larkin (2013, 333) has observed that “infrastructural projects” often function as the placeholders that allow people to “participate in a common visual and conceptual paradigm of what it means to be modern”; “Roads and railways are not just technical objects . . . but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire.”

All of this was hanging in the air as we sat in the newly cleaned temple courtyard, remembering what had been, wondering about what would be coming next.

Most of the people in Kedarnath on that day had been there the year before. The air was heavy with everything from memories of the past year to the presence of national media to the activity of the special task force composed of a number of different state, national, and private agencies involved in the work of reconstruction. The traumatic memories of what had happened jostled for space with political, economic, cultural, religious necessities that had forced the doors open again so soon and attracted people once again.

I felt that I had not done a good job of this conversation because I had been, at some level, trying to act like a researcher gathering data. So when I wandered over to one of the few buildings besides the temple that was still standing where several employees of the Samiti were staying I tried to inhabit the conversation in a different way, letting go of the idea that I would get information and simply trying to be present in a more human way. I did not try to conceal how emotional the visit was making me, and I think I saw the same thing on their faces. When we started talking, the idea came up that this was Shiva's place, not meant for people, something I had been told many times during my earlier fieldwork. One man, looking at me with the face of someone who had been in Kedarnath a year before and survived, said three words: "nature's *tandava* dance" (Hindi: *prakriti ka tandav*).

This phrase caught my notice. The more typical phrase would be Shiva or Rudra's *tandava* dance (Hindi: *Shiv ka tandav* or *Rudra ka tandav*). This is the dance Shiva dances to destroy impediments to liberation, to destroy in order to make space for a new cycle of creation, to rhythmically express his creative power. It is the dance Shiva danced to conquer the destructive being *Muyalakan* produced by the egoistic sages in the Pine Forest. It is the dance through which the divine totality shifts between emission and absorption, the play that makes space for the world. As Don Handelmann and David Shulman (1997, 152) put it: "The world as seen from, or through, Śiva's dance is one which is being, or has already been, sucked back into the infinite density of the whole."

But the priest substituted the word *nature* for Shiva. I have since thought carefully about this moment and have seen and heard similar phrases repeatedly. It has become clear that this phrase offered an important window into thoughts and feelings about the disaster because it illustrates the core assertion of this book—that the idea of eco-sociality is key for understanding how people conceive and experience, pre- and post-*apda*, the overlapping relationships between the putatively separate categories of human, divine, and natural that animate the Shaiva *shakti* of Kedarnath. One need only survey headlines about Uttarakhand flooding to see examples: "Monsoon's *Rudratandav* [Tandav dance of Rudra/Shiva] in Uttarakhand" (*Hindu Staff* 2013); "When the Ganga Descends" (Padmanabhaan 2013); "When the Himalayas Poured" (H. Kumar 2013b); "Facing Nature's Wrath" (Bhandari and Benson 2013); "How Uttarakhand Dug Its Grave" (Mazoomdaar 2013); "Flood Fury: Writing Was on the Wall" (*Down to Earth Staff* 2013). The agentive subject

shifts from monsoon to Shiva to Ganga to the humans of Uttarakhand to nature. The idea of *tandav* pulls the overlap of these elements in a Shaiva direction. The shifting agencies and linkages between human, divine, and natural on display here (which, it should be remembered, need not be understood as ontologically distinct categories) underscore the eco-sociality of the system.

I attempted to test my understanding of this conceptual complex on my journey back down to Gaurikund on May 5, 2014. This was difficult because I spent most of the walk focused on my own physical ordeal. It started to rain soon after I left Kedarnath, which meant that many parts of the path, which was still under construction, became coated with mud. Around Linchauli the soles of my boots separated from the rest of the boot, so I switched to sandals. The next several hours were mostly a step-by-step descent down a trail of mud and mud-covered stone, and my primary concern was getting down without injury. Despite the conditions I did manage to have an important conversation. I spoke with a group of five men from Delhi, one of whom came every year. I asked the one who came every year why he thought this had happened. First, he gave a Shiva-oriented explanation. He said that Shiva had become displeased with the state of the place. Then he said that there was, in addition to a *dharmic* explanation, a scientific explanation that these sorts of things happen every so often. The way he said that this made me wonder how my identity was affecting the way he was responding to the question. While I cannot be sure because it was a brief interaction in trying physical and weather conditions (a common problem with informal interviews conducted on the path between Kedarnath and Gaurikund), it felt to me that he did not want me to think that he was unaware of the scientific explanation, or that when he offered the Shiva-oriented explanation he felt pressure to also offer a corrective. I tried out the *prakriti ka tandav* formulation and he agreed with it. I asked the group how many people would come from Delhi this year. They said: not very many. The oscillation between and mixing of *dharmic* and scientific causation on display in this conversation reminded me of how Gamburd (2012, 35), in Sri Lankan conversations about the causes of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, found that “the power of karmic dynamics” and “geophysical explanations” were identified as (sometimes overlapping) causes, with informants preferring the “geophysical explanations.”

Upon my return to Ukhimath several days later, I again explored the *prakriti ka tandav* theme. In a long conversation with several employees of the Samiti in their offices across from the Omkareshwar Temple, I invited input on how to formulate the relationships between Shiva and *prakriti*. After a good deal of back and forth I came up with the following, which was approved by those present: “We can understand Shiva’s power by looking at nature [Hindi: *Prakriti ko dekh kar ham Shiv-ji ki shakti samajh sakte hain*]. This is because Shiva caused nature to tremble [Hindi: *prakriti hila di*].” The reason the temple in Kedarnath survived the floods was that Shiva can cause *prakriti* to tremble but *prakriti* cannot cause Shiva to tremble. We

made a distinction between three elements: Shiva, *prakriti*, and *shakti*. Shiva and *prakriti* are different/separate (Hindi: *bhinn*). However, in another conversation with a Kedarnath *pujari* a bit later on the same day he offered a different formulation: “*Prakriti* is the true form of *shakti*” (Hindi: *Prakriti shakti ka svarup hain*). This is a different formulation that pulls Shiva into the flows of water, rock, mud, and debris that descended on Kedarnath. It also recalls, implicitly, one of the most famous stories about *shakti*, water, and Shiva in Hindu traditions: the descent of the Ganga. Shiva decided to stop filtering Ganga’s power for a brief moment. Shiva is both connected to and separate from *prakriti*, and *prakriti* is a term that can signify both the natural world and under certain conditions particular forms of the Goddess, especially those connected to flowing water. This means that to understand these reactions and formulations we must not only understand the social and conceptual history of how people in different times and places in South Asia have understood the relationship of Shiva and Shakti, discussed in chapter 3, but also briefly investigate understandings of the term *prakriti* and its partial English cognate *nature*.

PRAKRITI

The idea of what twentieth-century Western thought might term nature (Hindi: *prakriti*) has a complicated and diverse history in South Asia both inside and outside the contexts of what some might today term explicitly or implicitly religious worldviews. In my discussion I alternate between writing *prakriti* and *nature* to draw the reader’s attention to how many modern South Asian understandings of *prakriti*/nature are in a sense hybrid concepts whose ancestries are both South Asian and European. To acquire a broad sense of some of the possible nuances of the term *prakriti* in the phrase *prakriti ka tandav*, it is necessary to first briefly move back in time and then rejoin the history of Uttarakhand from the point of view of the Kedarnath valley presented in chapter 4 as the story moves into the decades just before the floods.

As David Haberman (2013, 44) has put it, the idea that the entire world constitutes an organic “manifest” “divinity” in which all beings are interrelated is a common religious idea in South Asia with a long history. *Shakti* and *prakriti*, along with terms such as *brahman* (Sanskrit: ultimate or underlying Being, Existence), *qudrat* (Hindi/Urdu: divine power, creation), *jiva* (Sanskrit: life, life-spark), and *dharma* (Sanskrit: cosmic architecture, fundamental particle, balance, justice, and many related meanings), are terms that, in the broadest sense, frame this understanding. Different South Asian systems of thought have understood the nature and permanence of this underlying relatedness in many different ways. Contemplation of the natural world can, under the proper conditions, lead to liberating knowledge (Chapple 1998, 30).

Prakriti is an old term. Along with the Sanskrit term *purusha* (primordial person, consciousness), it is one of the two entities from which all reality proceeds in Samkhya, a philosophical system with roots over two thousand years old. K. L. Sheshagiri Rao (2000, 25) puts it this way: “*Prakriti*, cosmic matter, is the matrix of the entire material creation.” *Prakriti* can also be understood as a form of *shakti*. *Shakti* is a form of the Goddess who/which is often understood to contain and embody all goddesses and is often linked closely to Shiva. Today *shakti* is an idea that links the Mahapuranic worlds of Durga and Parvati, physical understandings of phenomena such as heat and fire, the local worlds of village goddesses (Hindi: *gram devi* or *gram devta* for village deity more generally) and understandings of the personhood, nature, power, and authority of women and, to a lesser degree, men (Padma 2013, 207, 267–68; Flueckiger 2013, 269; Shulman 1980; Wadley 1975). Both *prakriti* and *shakti* are also sometimes connected to the idea of *maya*. *Maya* can be both creative, the power through which the world becomes manifest, and “delusive . . . unreal,” the illusion from which arises ignorance about how things truly are (Pintchman 1994, 93–94). *Shakti* also connects to both sides of what Tracy Pintchman (1994, 202) has termed the “intermediacy of the feminine,” which oscillates and transitions between the auspicious and the inauspicious, the life-giving and the life-destroying. Forms of the Goddess, local and regionally important goddesses, and place-specific forms of *shakti* constitute many of the primary threads in the fabric of Hindu sacred geographies. Anne Feldhaus (1995) has noted the deep connections that bind together women and rivers in the state of Maharashtra. The historical identification of *shakti* and the Goddess with the natural world has served as one of the most important resources and at the same time problems (because of the equation of the natural with the feminine) for Indian environmentalists and ecofeminists (Sherma 1998, 96–97). Vandana Shiva (1988, xvi–xviii, 38–40), who posits the harmonious cooperation of humans with the natural world as an antidote to regnant patriarchal models of development and agro-technology, uses this kind of understanding as the basis for her work (see also Chapple 1998, 23).

In South Asian contexts some relevant and important conceptions of nature did not emerge directly out of the conceptual categories that crystallized in epic, Puranic and tantric, and philosophical Sanskrit texts. Relationships with the natural world, as they inflect through agriculture, hunting, material forms such as textiles, performance, ritual, and metaphysics, have been of profound and ubiquitous importance for those tribal and indigenous peoples in South Asia whom Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1995, 3) term “ecosystem people,” or those who historically “depend on the natural environments of their own locality to meet most of their material needs.” The worldviews of such groups, the groups whose local goddesses and gods sometimes became incorporated into the Shaiva, Vaishnava, and Shakta frameworks of the epics and *Puranas*, were not fully

(or often even partially) represented in Sanskrit-based genres and conceptual categories but have nonetheless been influential in how human-nature relationships have been understood and experienced in South Asia broadly and in the central Indian Himalaya specifically.

In the Tamil-speaking regions of South India, a famous set of classical poetic conventions established correspondences between particular interior emotional states and particular kinds of external natural landscapes that have deeply influenced how people in Tamil-speaking regions have lived their geography since the third century CE and have shaped the character of Tamil devotional poetry and sacred geography through to the present, which has in turn influenced other regional cultural geographies beyond Tamil-speaking regions (Ramanujan 1967; Selby and Peterson 2008, 1–16). Mughal and Persian understandings of the beauty of the natural world, alternatively, stressed the importance of agentic human involvement with the natural world. Christopher Hill (2008, 65–66) observes that the “practice of equating nature with heaven,” particularly through the construction of gardens meant to invoke “Paradise on Earth,” was a common and important way of picturing and relating to nature in medieval South Asia (see also Inden 2011). The domestication of nature through the construction of royal gardens became a political strategy for showing that the king held divine favor and became a theme that would influence the depiction of landscapes in “miniature painting,” an important collection of artistic genres in medieval South Asia (Hill 2008, 66).

During the periods of colonial encounter and British rule, the demands of trade and empire (and particularly the building of the railroad system) discussed in chapter 4 overlaid onto these numerous, interconnected layers of geographic imagination an instrumental conception of the natural world as resource and commodity that functioned on a massive scale. Among the many effects of this change was widespread deforestation across the subcontinent. Other effects included a shift in agriculture toward the cultivation of monoculture “cash crops,” higher levels of land taxation, and the production and extraction of “cheap raw materials”—“biological produce, rice and cotton, jute and indigo, tea and teak, as well as gold and precious stones” under deeply exploitative labor conditions (Gadgil and Guha 1995, 9–11). As already discussed in chapter 4, the instrumental and exploitative use of natural resources in South Asia by the British hit the Uttarakhand region hard and catalyzed popular movements that protested logging and the construction of hydroelectric dams (Gadgil and Guha 1993, 222–24; 1995, 22–24, 72, 84–85).

NATURAL BEAUTY

In the later stages of the colonial period it is possible to see constructions of “nature” by South Asian intellectuals that integrated and reinterpreted earlier

streams of thought and practice with ways of imagining the incipient nation-state. One example was how poets belonging to the Chayavad movement of Hindi poetry deployed the idea of nature. Valerie Ritter has charted how the evocation of “Natural objects” blended the nascent Indian nationalism of the late nineteenth century with a “furtively” recovered poetics of the *śhrīngara rasa*, the Sanskrit dramatic modality of eros and love, to create a “natural state of *śrīngāra* in the Indian media.” Ritter (2011, 248) argues that this use of nature imagery, with its mix of new nationalism and old aesthetic conventions, laid the basis for what would become a profoundly important popular idea, often referenced in Indian popular culture, of “India’s freedom itself as if a bride.” The connection of territorially grounded forms of nationalism to the body of the Goddess is, of course, best known in the concept of “Mother India” (Hindi: *Bharat Mata*), which makes the territory of the nation-state a form of the Goddess.

When I would speak to visitors to Kedarnath who did not present themselves as first and foremost participants in a devotional *yatra*, they would often say that their primary motivation was to see the natural beauty (Hindi: *prakritik saundarya*) of the Himalaya. This contemporary usage in part derives from how the Himalaya began to be viewed as “picturesque” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The European idea of the picturesque mountain landscape began to circulate in India as European explorers, photographers, colonial administrators, and soldiers trekked, traveled, painted, photographed, and wrote about the high Himalaya. Indian painters learned to paint in “Company” styles influenced by Western notions of landscape, perspective, and portraiture (Tolia-Kelly 2007; Tillotson 1990; Kennedy 1996; Whitmore 2012). The British began to build hill stations. The increase in travel to *tirthas* and fairs seen during the second half of the nineteenth century extended to the Himalaya, and by the beginning of the twentieth century the semantic range of *yatra* started to include forms of trekking and leisure travel that in the West would come to be termed “tourism.” Sandeep Banerjee (2014) has described the emergence of the idea of the Himalayan picturesque by showing how the underlying structures of British colonial power created the conditions for the domestication of the Himalaya through both the construction of highly controlled, racially segregated hill stations that evoked the English countryside and photographs of Himalayan vistas carefully framed to avoid the representation of local people and to evoke comparison to the European Alps.¹¹

Banerjee and Basu (2015, 616) have demonstrated that this notion of Himalayan natural beauty carried multiple associations that changed over time for particular groups, notably Bengalis. They observe that early nineteenth-century Bengali travelogues imagined a “Himalaya infused with an inner spirituality” reflective of the “monotheistic synergies between Sufi Islam, and Vedantic Hinduism” found in the work of Rabindranath Tagore. The authors make the case that in the second half of the nineteenth century urban middle-class (Bengali: *bhadralok*) Bengalis traveling to the Himalaya shifted from conceptualizing it as “a sacred space” to seeing it as

“a spatial metaphor of a putative nation-space,” reflecting a process of “secularization” and the emergence of a civil religion of the nascent nation-state of India (Banerjee and Basu 2015, 609). This recalls the uses of nature by the Chayavad poets described by Ritter, but in a Himalaya and Bengali-specific way.

NATURE IN UTTARAKHAND

Many of these broader ideas about nature/*prakriti* came to inform how people in Uttarakhand today and those who visit Uttarakhand view the natural world and conceptualize their relationship to it in environmental, cultural, political, and religious terms. It is, however, also important to attend to regionally specific understandings of *prakriti* that come into play when we think about “*prakriti ka tandav*” and *shakti* in and around Kedarnath and in the central Indian Himalaya more broadly.

Over the last century and a half, and particularly in the last twenty to thirty years, ideas about and aspects of nature/*prakriti* have come to function as marked terms, “a major and explicit point of reference” in understandings of what after 2000 could be called “Uttarakhandi” regional identity or more broadly *pahari* identity (Linkenbach 2006, 152, 164). For Uttarakhandi *paharis*, according to Linkenbach (2006, 164), “The hills are geographically and ecologically set apart from the mainland, they are rich in natural resources such as forest and water, they provide pure air. As a *dharmic* land, the hills are responsible for the religiosity and honesty of the inhabitants; they provide a morally pure space.”¹² To be *pahari* and from Uttarakhand was not to reject the encroachment of modernity and development but rather to envision a specific kind of development and “regional modernity” that were in line with the ecological and moral patterns of the mountains (Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). This move was a cornerstone of the Gandhi-inspired Sarvodaya social justice activist movement and also of the philosophies of the Chipko movement introduced in chapter 4 (Moore 2003, 187). It represented an intersection of “regional modernity” with what Cederlöf and Sivaramakrishnan (2006) term “ecological nationalism.”

Thus the idea of nature/*prakriti* operative in the Uttarakhand of recent decades connects the worlds of forest, field, river, and mountain to several different modalities of geographic experience. On the one hand the natural world is infused with local and translocal manifestations of *shakti* and the presence of locally, regionally, and nationally significant divine agents. Networks of locally and regionally significant deities, spirits, and ancestors pervade the natural landscape in a manner that is similar to that described by place-based indigenous (Gadgil and Guha’s “ecosystem people”) traditions in most parts of the subcontinent and more broadly across the world (Sax 2009, 54). On the other hand, the idea of nature evokes discourses of nationalism, regionalism, political economy and ecology, and

development (Hindi: *vikas*). Seeing the involvement of the idea of *prakriti* in all of these related contexts helps us approach the feeling that, in the aftermath of the floods of June 2013, somehow all of these interrelated spheres of human activity and experience contained a sense of wrongness.

HONA HI THA

On the way back down from my trip to Kedarnath at the beginning of the season in May 2014, I spoke with a Kedarnath valley friend, as I had on the way up, in one of the few places that had not been destroyed in 2013. He had been standing on the roof of a building in Kedarnath when the floods came, and he survived. We spoke about everything from why I lived so far away from my parents to how people had been doing since the *apda* to the nature of my ongoing research about Kedarnath. We discussed what I was planning to write. Eventually he made a point of letting me know a detail that he considered very important for understanding how people in the Kedarnath valley viewed the *apda*. He said there was a phrase that almost everyone used when talking about it: “It was bound to happen” (Hindi: *Hona hi tha*). When he told me this, I noted that talking about the disaster in this way left ambiguous whether “it was bound to happen” because the Himalaya was a changeable natural environment that had to be approached carefully, because Kedarnath had “turned into a picnic place” and Shiva noticed, or because proper building codes, site administration, and advance warning had not been present. He agreed that it was ambiguous and left it at that. In a later return to this conversation he emphasized that he had been mostly referring to the physical likelihood of a flood event of the kind that happened in 2013, suggesting to me an uneasiness about what I might have taken from our previous conversation.

Several days later, in Ukhimath, another Kedarnath valley local said about the disaster, “Everyone has this *dosh*” (Hindi: *Prani matra doshi hain*). *Dosh* is a common term in Hindi and many other South Asian languages that derives from the Sanskrit word *dosha*. *Dosha* and its cognates in different South Asian languages, depending on context, can mean criminal guilt, “bodily disorder,” (for example, in the Ayurvedic sense), an astrological problem, a family problem, “fault,” or a curse or affliction originating from a god, demon, or spirit (Sax 2009, 37, 59, 114; Allocco 2009; McGregor 1993, s.v. “dosh”). People, soil, crops, and animals can have *dosh*, and there are an array of individual and collective practices through which *dosh* can be lifted. I was told in Kedarnath several times that when Garhwali deities came with people from their villages on a *yatra* that was not part of an established *yatra* cycle (such as, for some Garhwali *devtas*, going on pilgrimage every six or twelve years) there was probably some sort of collective or familial *dosh* behind the deity’s visit and that the visit to Kedarnath was for the purposes of erasing the *dosh* (Hindi: *dosh nivaran*).

I read this post-*apda* statement that everyone has *dosh*, then, as a statement that can be analytically thought about at many different levels: as an internal disorder in the eco-social fabric of the valley; as the displeasure of a deity at specific actions indicating a lack of respect; as the product of the untimely death of many people; as the emergence of a disjunction between people and place; as the changing and souring of social relations that went hand in hand with the recent hypercapitalization of the valley.¹³ It might also mean that lifting the *dosh* would somehow involve all or most of these different factors because, to return to the argument of the chapter, the divine, the natural, and the socioeconomic are bound up with each other in powerful ways in Kedarnath. This line of interpretation is a way of analytically conceptualizing the situation in ways that are in dialogue with ways of thinking on the ground in the Kedarnath valley. Radhika Govindraj (2015, 504), in the context of fieldwork on forms of “interspecies kinship” in the central Indian Himalaya, describes a profoundly salient conversation with Devidutt, a Kumauni man, about what caused the Kedarnath floods that also connects to this idea of *dosh*. Devidutt rejected the idea that the floods were caused by anything having to do with ill-planned construction or weather changes produced by climate change. Rather, for him they were clearly the result of “divine revenge” against the 2011 Uttarakhand High Court ruling that had prohibited animal sacrifice, itself a substitution for the earlier practice of human sacrifice. In his view, “The gods had resumed taking human sacrifice and would continue to do so until animal sacrifice was offered to them again.”

If one puts these two sentiments together (“Hona hi tha” and “Prani matra doshi hain”), then a very important understanding emerges about how some Kedarnath valley residents who were involved with the pilgrimage-tourism industry have felt since the *apda*. There is a sense both that they are victims of an event in which divine agency, geological and meteorological processes, and economic patterns were all involved and that they are also personally and collectively somehow responsible. What happened was an event of natural/divine causation. It was somehow the product of the rapidly expanding bubble of economic growth and commercial infrastructure development of the last decade and a half, the result of processes that were both transparent and opaque to the people involved. It was the product of people not acting as they should with each other, with the divine powers of the valley, and with the natural world. What happened was an intensification of what always happens in a Himalayan landscape prone to landslides and floods, but that intensification could have been prevented. Now we have to lift the *dosh* because it is our *dosh*.

VIKAS

Part of the *dosh* has to do with the idea and practice of “development.” The wrong kind of development (Hindi: *vikas*) exacerbated the severity of this disaster (Jayaraman 2013). *Development* is a global term with many different context-

sensitive meanings that typically have to do with the improvement or ostensible improvement of material, somatic, social, economic, cultural, and political living conditions. This idea has often functioned as the placeholder for what it was thought formerly colonized and other non-Global North peoples had to do to become successfully modern according to the standard set by the Global North. HariPriya Rangan (2004, 207) has offered a useful summary of what this term signifies in a general sense in India:

There the idea of development (referred to in the vernacular as *vikas*, meaning both the process of moving towards the dawn of a new social era, and the social era itself) has been used as a secular, democratic means for opening the political arena to the claims of various groups in civil society. Development is charged with the promise of change towards greater social equality and prosperity for all citizens. It has been taken up by disadvantaged groups as a means of gaining political recognition and access to economic empowerment.

This general understanding has acquired specific meanings in Uttarakhand in recent decades. Pampa Mukherjee (2012, 201) has shown that an “alternative vision of development” was formative in the political visions for the new state that emphasized sensitivity to local needs and local autonomy in “ecologically sound” ways. For example, Mukherjee has observed that there was a strong push to shape Uttarakhand into a preeminent producer of organic produce and “floriculture” because this was a kind of production that could be carried out in localized, decentralized terrace farming that would be possible and sustainable in the mountains (212). However, to a large extent this was not the kind of growth that happened after the creation of the state in 2000. Instead, industrial manufacturing fueled strong economic development in those sections of the state not located in the hills (Mamgain 2008; Kar 2007).

In the mountainous terrain constituting the majority of the state, a good deal of economic growth was greatly influenced by the needs of different kinds of tourism, some more related to *yatra* and some less. However, the growth of infrastructure and the nature of economic development connected to pilgrimage and tourism and more broadly in the mountainous regions of the state did not unfold in a sustainable direction. Rather, to return to the voices of outrage with which the chapter began, the spatialization of capital took a path contrary to the founding vision of the state. Most of the building and investing in the Garhwal of recent decades was aimed at servicing the needs of the increasing numbers of middle-class *yatris* and the North Indian power grid without regulatory regard for the long-term environmental health of the region and its human and nonhuman residents. Hridayesh Joshi (2016, 133) again provides a useful and trenchant summary: “Despite a series of disasters in Uttarakhand, the government has no specific policy for development and planned construction keeping the environmental issues in mind. . . . Since the state leaders themselves are involved in hospitality and real estate, both overtly and covertly, no one actively discourages illegal construction.” Very little

of what happened with water and earth in June of 2013 was unprecedented. The terrible surprise was the personal, social, structural, and political myopia that made the impact of the floods and landslides so severe. It is because of this longer framework of causes and conditions that it makes sense to characterize the floods of 2013 as, in important ways, an *unnatural* disaster.

VIKAS BEFORE THE APDA

When the term *development* (Hindi: *vikas*) came up in conversation in connection to Kedarnath during my predisaster visits to the Kedarnath valley, it usually had several specific and linked meanings. An old woman from Jaipur, in a conversation in Kedarnath on May 24, 2007, linked *vikas* to amenities (Hindi: *suvidhaen*)—the availability of rooms with good blankets, warm water, and different kinds of food, telephone, electricity, and medical care. For several pilgrimage priests with whom I had conversations on the topic in 2007 and 2008, *vikas* meant increased access to Kedarnath via helicopter, the motor road, and other potential transport avenues such as ropeways. Implicitly, these were the avenues through which most people whose livelihood was connected to Kedarnath were earning more, borrowing more, sending their children out of the Kedarnath valley (in some cases as far as Dehra Dun) to go to school, enjoying the fruits of disposable income, and becoming reasonably confident that their children would enjoy greater access to health care, education, and eventually salaried employment (Hindi: *nowkri*).

Vikas in this sense was something that, prior to 2013, almost everyone in the Kedarnath valley even remotely connected to the pilgrimage tourism industry wanted to encourage. More and more middle-class *yatris* were coming who were willing to pay for higher-end food, rooms, textiles, and conveniences. It made sense to borrow money from banks and relatives to service this growing need.¹⁴ It made sense for roads to be widened without regard for their long-term stability. In 2011, friends of mine in Kedarnath were adding new rooms and floors to their lodges and *dharamshalas* that targeted this demographic—rooms with in-room hot water heaters, a rooftop “café” with a nice view. In 2007 there was a “coffee shop” on the main street in Kedarnath selling instant coffee for fifteen to twenty rupees a cup. While the Samiti did build two large structures where large groups of poor *yatris* could, at a pinch, spend the night, relatively little concerted attention was being given in pre-2013 Kedarnath to the building of large, inexpensive accommodations.

For many locals in Kedarnath, in Gaurikund, and throughout the Kedarnath valley, discussions of *vikas* immediately became discussions about avenues of transport to Kedarnath: motor road, helicopter, horse, and ropeway. The necessity and/or imminent extension of the motor road to Kedarnath or Rambara was a common topic of chai-shop discussion in Kedarnath. Many locals were strongly in favor of this because it directly equated to an increase in the number of visitors.

During such discussions, however, it was often pointed out that people have been lobbying to bring the motor road to Kedarnath for decades. I remember mentioning this once to a Garhwali professor, and he immediately and vehemently said that there should never be a motor road to Kedarnath even if it meant that Garhwal would remain forever poor. When I repeat this story I am always quick to point out that his income was not tied to Kedarnath.

The tension generated by conversations about the motor road paled in comparison to the conflict that could be generated by the subject of helicopter *yatra*. Over the course of the previous decade, helicopter *yatra* had become an increasingly common feature of daily life in Kedarnath, particularly in the high season. When you were walking or riding up the path from Gaurikund, at many spots the helicopters zoomed up the valley pass very close overhead because of the relative height of the path and the narrowness of the valley. I remember thinking that it was a very strange juxtaposition between a traditional mode of traveling to Kedarnath for over a millennium and a form of transport that was very new. Many *yatris* would stop walking to point or take pictures. Sometimes it was the first time people had seen a helicopter close up. Kedarnath valley locals in the upper half of the Kedarnath valley whose businesses were not connected to helicopter *yatra* often resented the growth of helicopter service because it meant that their rooms, food, and shops were being overflowed by the middle-class *yatris* with more money to spend. Others thought that this kind of resentment was shortsighted because eventually the Kedarnath valley pilgrimage economy would reorganize itself and the horse porters and lodge owners would be able to make money doing something different. At the beginning of the 2007 season I witnessed a demonstration against helicopter *yatra* in Gaurikund, and it has been a matter of considerable tension in Kedarnath. There was a strike by horse porters in Kedarnath about helicopter *yatra* in Kedarnath immediately before the floods in 2013.

While this is my analytic imposition, I have come to feel that the god Bhairavnath is understood to be, at some level, anti-*vikas*. Certainly he is anti-built environment. Bhukund Bhairavnath, the resident deity for Kedarnath whose job it is to protect the area, has been repeatedly asked to permit the building of a proper temple over his shrine in Kedarnath, and he has refused, saying, "I need to be able to see in all directions" (Hindi: *Mujhe charon aur dekhne ke liye chahiye*). I have also heard that this is the view of the deity Jakh who lives above Narayan Koti in the Kedarnath valley and whose Vaisakhi *mela* is one of the biggest events of the year.¹⁵

THE TONE OF RECONSTRUCTION

All of these tensions could be seen in how reconstruction in Kedarnath had been proceeding when I visited in 2014. I noted the profound ambivalence about how to proceed that often marks disaster-affected regions in the aftermath (Feener 2016).

The founding vision of Uttarakhand needed to be visibly upheld in the reconstruction process. The needs of residents had to be publicly valued. The state was theoretically aiming for a slower, safer, and more responsible kind of growth—carefully planned, sustainably developed *yatra* tourism that could regulate, limit, and reframe the flow of visitors to the Char Dham sites and Hemkund Sahib and instead invite them to visit other places of natural beauty and cultural importance in Uttarakhand. For example, in a meeting with an official in the Department of Tourism for Uttarakhand in May 2014, he said that Uttarakhand tourism recognizes that the number of visitors to Kedarnath (and hence the Char Dham) is likely to decrease in the near future (as it has, though it significantly rebounded in 2016) and that they are working on schemes that will encourage other forms of tourism—adventure tourism such as watersports on Tehri Lake or tourism where you stay in someone's home and take walking tours or view folk performances. His goals were to make travel to Uttarakhand feel “safe” and to decenter, to the extent possible, Char Dham Yatra tourism. It was very clear in 2014 that this kind of limited, diversified, and decentralized tourism could be beneficial for the region in the long term. Such plans were attempting to achieve a more “holistic” kind of economic development while not jettisoning the idea that Uttarakhand needed a great deal of revenue from tourism to flourish.¹⁶

These plans were not a wholly acceptable solution for people whose lives were involved with Kedarnath because any sort of thoughtful regulation of the area was likely to reduce the number of visitors, diminish local autonomy, and reduce the possibility of extremely high earnings in any given short period of time. There was, and continues to be, a sense that the goal is to attract as many visitors as possible to Uttarakhand for *yatra* tourism and that it is the responsibility of the state and central governments to help. In the Kedarnath valley the drawing power of the *yatra* industry even made it difficult to convince locals of the importance of integrating sustainable natural resource management techniques into current agricultural practices (Maikhuri et al. 2014). On the other hand, Kedarnath pilgrimage priests and local business people often resented state control or regulation from outside the valley. Kedarnath pilgrimage priests had already been in conflict with the Samiti, which is partially connected to the state government, for years about issues relating to side-door entry into the Kedarnath temple and saw postflood reconstruction proposals as extensions of this conflict that furthered abrogated their traditional rights and their Kedarnath-based livelihoods. Did the resistance of the Kedarnath pilgrimage priests to the Geological Survey of India proposal mean that they were blind to the necessity for reconstruction in Kedarnath that would be geologically, architecturally, and environmentally responsible and that they were unaware of their own role in how Kedarnath had changed in recent decades? It did not. The situation was simply more complicated than that.

THE TANDAVA OF A COMPLEX ECO-SOCIAL SYSTEM

Undergirding this welter of social, political, and economic contestation was the broader ecological experience of and uncertainty about climate change, deforestation, earthquakes, the increased incidence of landslides, floods (particularly GLOFs), and the impact of anthropogenic landscape changes such as road construction and widening and the hydroelectric dams whose construction generated the outraged sentiment quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The floods of 2013 and the destruction caused by flood, landslide, and earthquake events in recent decades can all in one way or another be connected to each of these issues. These complex connections are sometimes termed “hazard cascades” (Gardner 2015, 354). Specifying the exact nature of the connections is difficult. Climate scientists in recent years have begun to spend more time looking for connections between specific weather events and longer-term patterns of climate change, but these connections remain fuzzy in the absence of sufficient longitudinal data and measurement techniques that have earned scholarly consensus.¹⁷ Events similar to the floods that struck Uttarakhand in 2013 are becoming more frequent because of climate destabilization, and discourses about climate change now inform how Uttarakhandis themselves think about what they are experiencing (Mathur 2015a, 88). GLOFs will probably become more frequent. Nayanika Mathur (2015a, 87) has described how in recent years climate change talk was deployed in the Indian Himalaya both as an “explanation for recurring incidences of human-animal conflict and the disappearance of a protected species through the labors of the local state bureaucracy” and as an example of a “conspiracy” that aimed to draw a veil over the real problem. In one case, locals in the Gopeshwar area told her that in recent years bears had been going mad and becoming increasingly aggressive because they, like humans, were angered by “the barefaced exploitation of the natural resources by the state and corporations working in tandem” (99–100).

The degree of blame that could be attributed to the construction of large hydroelectric projects, one of the targets of accusations quoted earlier in this chapter, was in 2014 similarly fuzzy. In April of 2014 a group of researchers headed by Ravi Chopra submitted a report to the Ministry of Environment and Forests of the Government of India entitled “Assessment of Environmental Degradation and Impact of Hydroelectric Projects during the June 2013 Disaster in Uttarakhand” (Chopra et al. 2014). The commission (given on August 13, 2013) for the constitution of the expert body and their report arose out of a preflood court case involving a hydroelectric company: *Alaknanda Hydro Power Co. Ltd. versus Anuj Joshi & others* (Chopra et al. 2014, i). The purpose of the report was to investigate what impact existing hydroelectric projects had on the effects of the flooding in June 2013 and more broadly on environmental degradation in the region and to consider whether data gained from the 2013 floods might suggest a different

regulatory policy for existing and proposed hydroelectric projects in Uttarakhand. The necessity of such a report was obvious given the sentiments expressed at the beginning of this chapter. The report, over two hundred pages, concluded that twenty-three out of twenty-four existing and proposed large-scale hydroelectric projects posed significant impacts to local and regional biodiversity and that these projects should not proceed or be allowed to function at full speed until full environmental impact reports had been submitted and reviewed. It further noted that there were competing narratives about the impact of the dams on the floods. Reports furnished by the hydroelectric projects argued that some dams (such as the Tehri Dam) had held back the full force of the floods.¹⁸ Chopra and his team of his researchers (2014, 10) offered a nuanced counterargument that argued for a closer examination of how dams managed muck or sediment flow, particularly in the case of the Phata-Byung (in the Kedarnath valley), Singoli-Bhatwari (in the Kedarnath valley), Vishnuprayag, and Srinagar hydroelectric projects (see also H. Joshi 2016, 146–47). Much of the destruction caused by the floods in 2013 was caused not by pure water but by muck: water infused with rock, dirt, sand, and mud that had built up and then overflowed barriers and boundaries. However, this report did not correlate the floods themselves to the building of hydroelectric dams. Rather, the report upheld the urgency and the complexity of the question of the degree to which human activity had worsened the impact of the floods. To summarize, understandings, theories, and claims about the degree of human responsibility (and specifically the humans residing in the region) for the flood and its impact displayed wildly contradictory variations that implicated the state and its residents to varying degrees. It remains unclear in a general sense where exactly to locate the building of hydroelectric dams inside this broader landscape of anthropogenic landscape change in the Himalaya, except for the obvious hazards created by building, in the name of *vikas*, large hydroelectric projects in a seismically active region (Valdiya 2014).

Since 2000, people had come to experience the *vikas* that came with *yatra* tourism, and that was itself connected to this longer and broader history of *vikas* phenomena in the region, in several different ways. *Vikas* was problematic because it had begun to turn the *tirtha* into a picnic place and had diluted the purity of life in the mountains. And at the same time *vikas* was linked to the influx of money that was quickly raising (by some measures) the standard of living, the process enabling people to connect to national and global economies to a far greater degree than ever before. The vicissitudes of pilgrimage tourism in Kedarnath and the Kedarnath valley before and after the *apda* came to be linked to discourses about development and discourses about the relationship of humans with the various forms of divine power embedded in and constituted by the natural environment signified by the terms *Shiva*, *shakti*, and *prakriti*. The idea of *prakriti* functioned to bind together this cluster of discourses, experiences, and practices.

In many ways the interconnectedness of this Kedarnath-based system of Shiva, *shakti*, *prakriti*, and *vikas* recalls what Ann Grodzins Gold (1998, 178) and Bhoju Ram Gujar noticed about how Rajasthani villagers considered morality, landscape, weather, human relationships, divine anger, and deforestation to be all part of “One Story.” Gold and Gujar found a perception of an underlying unity and connectedness of living things that framed discussions of environmental degradation. In the broadest sense, environmental degradation was understood to be in part produced by the ripening of human *karma* (174). In Kedarnath, post-*apda* reactions and opinions about how reconstruction should proceed reflected these same conceptual linkages. People proclaimed that Kedarnath needed to become less of a picnic place (out of respect for *prakriti*, for Dev Bhumi, for Uttarakhand, for the sacredness of a *tirtha*) and that the redevelopment of the place should proceed along sustainable lines. Uttarakhand needed to rebuild Kedarnath in a way that would be in accordance with the famous pronouncement of Sunderlal Bahuguna that “ecology is permanent economy” (James 2013, 1). All of these requirements pointed toward the necessity of an overall long-term decrease in the number of visitors to Kedarnath.

However, during my visit to the Kedarnath valley in 2014 it seemed that the idea that pilgrimage tourism should not be the main avenue for economic development there was almost unthinkable. The force of the market was pushing in the opposite direction, making Gold and Gujar’s “One Story” a story that could be told only under certain conditions. Kedarnath valley locals did not feel just one way about why the *apda* happened and how reconstruction should proceed. In her book on Ganga-related environmental activism, Georgina Drew (2017, 54) reports a conversation with Dr. Ramaswamy Iyer in which he insightfully and simply expressed a similar complexity regarding how people think about the Ganga by stating that “a river is many things.” Drew accordingly observed a complex and connected set of understandings regarding the causes, effects, and remedies for how climate change and the construction of hydroelectric dams such as the Tehri Dam affect the flow of the river goddess Ganga. She also found, in separate but related research, that people living along the banks of the Ganga in and around Uttarkashi both “acknowledged the possibility that glaciers such as Gangotri-Gaumukh may be melting because of our global emissions and environmental hubris” and “at the same time” felt that the Ganga could survive these changes because she also existed in the “heavens” and the “underworld” (Drew 2014b, 34–35). Additionally, “Hindu conceptions of right action” informed people’s understanding of the anthropogenic nature of some of these changes (Drew 2014b, 35).

The analysis of Vijaya Rettakudi Nagarajan is also useful for conceptually modeling this complex situation because it offers an explanation for what might appear as a lack of consistency in human-nature relationships in South Asian contexts. In her theorizing of South Indian understandings of how the “Earth as Goddess

Bhu Devi" is understood to be present in *kolam* designs created by women as representations of auspiciousness and as a form of "painted prayer," Nagarajan (1998, 278) offers an explanation for why the religious importance of human-environment relationships has not been consistently upheld in the environmental history of South Asia. Drawing on the famous observations of A. K. Ramanujan about context-sensitive thinking, Nagarajan suggests that what she terms the "force" and "substance" of "sacrality" of the earth functions as a set of "embedded ecologies" that are present in daily life, but whose presence and reality are "intermittent" (278–79).¹⁹ This idea helps Nagarajan explain why traditional ways of thinking that emphasize the closeness and interdependence of the human and the natural have led to the high levels of environmental degradation in India today: human perceptions of the sacredness of the earth inflect intermittently and in context-sensitive ways rather than continuously and pervasively.

In the months and now years after the floods of 2013 these ideas of intermittence, one-story-ness, and many thinged-ness help us understand the complexity of the emotional, moral, political, social, and ecological dilemmas faced by those tasked with rebuilding Kedarnath and returning there to try and make their living once again. In my view, however, one must keep in mind how these multiple variables at play in the Kedarnath place-situation functioned at the level of felt experience as a single thing, a single system characterized by the complex, nonlinear interplay of the forces of the market, the weather, the landscape, politics, trauma, *dosh*, and divine displeasure. Residents of the Himalaya were and are still feeling their way through the unfolding concatenation of phenomena relating to climate change, globalization, regional modernities, and an array of local, regional, and transregional religious worldviews. The causal relationships among these phenomena are highly variable and still, for many, opaque. Ehud Halperin's (2017) recent work on how phenomena relating to climate change interface with local religion in the Kullu valley of Himachal Pradesh captures this situation precisely.

What I want to emphasize at the close of this chapter is not so much how different meanings or events that can be found in the situation arose but more the felt, eco-social, emergent weight of this situation as a whole and how it affected the place at the beginning of the season in 2014. The enmeshed interplay of the presence and power of Shiva and Shakti, the multivalenced Himalayan *prakriti* location, the network of resident local divine powers, the ideas and practices of *vikas* produced by the political ecology of the region—the place gathered it all together as Kedarnath-Shiva continued to attract humans to its *daldali bhumi* (Hindi: marshy ground, the Hindi translation for the Sanskrit word *kedara*). Every time there was a period of intense rain or landslides, memories would come crashing back. This was the situation on the ground when I visited in 2014.