

Topographies of Reinvention

Visiting the Kedarnath valley in 2014 was hard. Experiencing the grief and despair of residents in the area over and over again caused my emotions to numb out of self-protection. At the same time I felt great guilt—I was able to leave. This situation of constraint was not, at the end of the day, my situation. I was a scholar writing a book. A friend of mine in the Kedarnath valley told me that he had sent his family to live in Dehra Dun because he could not set aside his fear of landslides and floods but that he needed to stay because his business was based in the Kedarnath valley. Subjectively, I felt as if a weight lifted when I left the Kedarnath valley and was walking through the market in Srinagar. For the first time, I felt, in weeks, I saw groups of people smiling and laughing. In Dehra Dun it seemed like business as usual. I found a special issue of the English daily newspaper the *Garhwal Post* from the previous year entitled “Voices of Uttarakhand” in a bookshop just off Raipur Road, one of the most cosmopolitan streets in Uttarakhand. The dedicatory inscription read, “Garhwal Post pays homage to the thousands who lost their lives, property, and livelihood due to the combined impact of God’s intervention and man’s neglect.” When I told the bookseller I was looking for *apda*-related material he said that he had almost nothing left from the previous year, when there had been a torrent. People have already forgotten, he said.

I visited Uttarakhand again briefly in January of 2017. Kedarnath was, of course, officially closed at the time. Reconstruction work, however, was ongoing. The Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM) had workers and machinery in Kedarnath and was coordinating from its local office in Sonprayag in the Kedarnath valley. The institute, led by Colonel Ajay Kothiyal, was one of the most important players in the reconstruction of Kedarnath. Its involvement began almost

immediately after the floods of 2013, when its mountaineering expertise became critically important for finding and rescuing survivors and mapping escape routes. Later, NIM took charge of many aspects of the reconstruction of Kedarnath: the construction of a new heavy-duty helipad for MI-26 cargo helicopters behind the temple, a three-layer semicircular boundary wall designed to protect Kedarnath against future flood events, and a new bathing *ghat* and bridge on the banks of the Mandakini at the southwestern edge of Kedarnath village. NIM also restored the path between Gaurikund and Kedarnath that, since 2013, has run along the eastern bank of the Mandakini after crossing the bridge near the ruins of what was once Rambara. It would be a massive understatement to observe that by January of 2017 this reconstruction campaign, accomplished in extremely challenging conditions, made Colonel Kotiyal, as the leader of these efforts by NIM, a public hero throughout Uttarakhand, renowned for both his competence and his commitment to the public good. NIM has also involved itself with another project relating to *yatra* in the Garhwali Dev Bhumi: the Nanda Devi Royal Yatra (Hindi: *Nanda Devi Raj Jat*, once famously described by William Sax).

Checking in with friends and acquaintances during this visit was sometimes uncomfortable. Talking with me brought back their memories and experiences of 2013 that, I think, people were trying to leave behind as best they could—trying to move past grief over lost loved ones and the fraught memory-fear that bad weather now evoked. I had not spent enough recent time in the Kedarnath valley to feel fully caught up with relationships and with what was going on. As we navigated these tensions I found, among the friends and acquaintances with whom I spoke, a cautious optimism. The *yatri* numbers were increasing again. New systems were in place—biometric registration of *yatris*, increased government attention to road and weather conditions, the undiminished involvement of the state government. Friends of mine who had two years before made the risky decision to wait out a lean period and remain connected to *yatra* tourism in Kedarnath were starting to feel a bit relieved. At the same time, many earlier patterns were still unfolding but with new iterations. There continued to be widespread chai-shop controversy on the kinds of relief provided to Kedarnath survivors and the families of the dead. The ability of Kedarnath locals who owned property in and around Kedarnath itself to rebuild their businesses continued to be in conflict with how NIM, the Samiti, the Rudraprayag district (Hindi: *zila*) government, and the state government were approaching reconstruction in Kedarnath. The number of *yatris* using helicopter services seemed, anecdotally, to be on the rise.

The recent past was becoming part of the longer story of the place. The journey to Kedarnath now layers in legends of disaster. The path from Gaurikund, after crossing over to the eastern side of the Mandakini near where Rambara used to be, carries the memory of where the old path used to run. Particularly above Linchauli, the new midpoint, the new path is more difficult than the old path, and

I suspect we will now see that when family groups visit Kedarnath on the Char Dham some but not all will make it all the way to Kedarnath. GMVN's free food and lodgings for *yatris* may become a permanent part of the place. Here is where Rambara used to be. Here is the *divya shila* that protected the temple. Behind the village is where the cargo helicopters can now land, and behind that is the boundary wall. The built environment of Kedarnath now models a particular relationship, almost a challenge, to the natural tendencies of the place—a claim that what humans have built after the floods can withstand whatever comes next. Implicit in this built environment is a redoubled commitment to the power of government-supported civil engineering and environmental science.

SENSING ECO-SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

This book orbits the idea that it is useful to view experiences of Kedarnath as experiences of a place that functions as an eco-social system characterized by complexity. In this place Shiva, the Goddess, human actors, cultural forms, objects, economic networks, the landscape, and the weather are all variables that interact with each other and that are in certain ways almost multiforms of each other. This current state of affairs is the result of the partially continuous and partially disjunctive, emergent blending of premodern patterns of Himalayan, Shaiva, and Shakta eco-social thought and practice with modern, colonial, and postcolonial relationships to Hindu traditions, the natural world, religious travel, tourism, and development. The roughly chronological story I have told shows how the pursuit of *dharma* carried out by the Pandavas came to be woven together with first-millennium CE understandings of Shiva's presence in the Himalaya in a way that constructed Kedarnath as a place of purification, violence, wounding, blessing, transformation, presence, and absence. Kedarnath became a somewhat inaccessible node on the subcontinent-wide network of sacred geography attested in Puranic and Upapuranic texts. It became part of the transregional webs of different Shaiva groups. It became a destination for kings and renunciants, a point of intersection between the "below" of the Gangetic plain and the higher worlds of the Himalayan hills, mountains, and glaciers. In the last two centuries it became a destination for people, mostly Hindus, from all walks of life. The Kedarnath valley became part of British Garhwal, and Kedarnath, along with Badrinath, came to be a point of contention between the British administrators of British Garhwal and the kings of Tehri. The Kedarnath valley was important during the Chipko movement and, like much of the Garhwal Himalaya, is part of a region that has been marked for well over a century by contestation over land use (particularly tree cutting) and the control of water (the canalization of the Ganga in Haridwar, one of the gateways to Garhwal, and the construction of the Tehri Dam and other large-scale hydroelectric projects). These projects were based on an instrumental

relationship to the natural world that construed woods and water as resources to be mined and controlled for the benefit of those outside the region. Travel to Kedarnath and Badrinath came to be done as part of the Char Dham Yatra to Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath. This pilgrimage, along with Sikh pilgrimage to Hemkund Sahib, fed into the construction of the region as Dev Bhumi, the Land of the Gods, a modern commercial appellation based on multiple layers of premodern reverence for this section of the Himalaya, whose shrines are particularly well attested in Puranic literature. As *yatra* gave way to *yatra* tourism, the Himalaya and all the divine powers resident there became connected to modern Western ideas about “nature” and natural beauty that were based partially on the idea that humans were somehow separate from nature. Specific understandings of Himalayan nature became formative for regional identity and became part of the increasingly touristic and nature-oriented practices and expectations of visitors coming for the Char Dham Yatra. The rise in the number of middle-class visitors in recent decades combined with the new state’s strong but short-sighted support for *yatra* tourism to produce a situation where traditional knowledge and practice about how to live, build, and travel in the Himalaya was overlooked. As a result, an instrumental relationship to the natural world was enacted on a hitherto unprecedented scale. Roads were widened. Hotels were built on floodplains. Visitor numbers were not regulated. The floods of 2013 punctured and exposed this rapidly expanding, unsustainable growth. Because of how premodern stories, experiences, understandings, and practices connected Shiva, Devi, *shakti* (and thereby *prakriti*), and myriad *devtas* with the land and water of *kedaraman-dala*, an intense, complex, fluid sense of divine presence and power is woven throughout this emplaced situation. This wovenness, this *enmeshing*, characterizes the postflood situation in ways that are sometimes opaque and sometimes transparent even as the situation continues to unfold and change as we move away in time from the floods. Kedarnath, by October 1 of the 2017 pilgrimage season, had reportedly welcomed 441,770 visitors (Shree Badarinath-Shri Kedarnath Temples Committee 2017).

I have written this account to give a sense of both the feeling and the materiality of this powerful place, the profoundly interconnected nature of these different arenas and contexts, and the way that this “system” is situated in space and time. I chose to write in this way because this is what I think a scholar of religion has to contribute to our understanding of the situation. My training and voice are not necessary to expose the profound ways that failures of the (postcolonial) state intensified the impact of the flooding and helped create the conditions leading up to that intensified impact. These are matters of public record. So why this book? First, it is a way of bearing witness, and bearing witness is an act that may resound in unpredictable ways.

Second, my experience, research, and training have allowed me to see a depth of connection in this situation between what are often construed as separate arenas



FIGURE 15. Kedarnath in 2017. Photograph by Madelyn P. Ramachandran.

and contexts. It is my hope that social scientists, natural scientists, policy makers, and elites of diverse types will make better decisions, construct better research agendas, and be more willing to explore new forms of collaboration after encountering robust and portable ways of thinking about the embeddedness of “religion” in human life. By “robust and portable ways” I mean models that show how phenomena connected to what some people might sometimes term “religion” are pervasively embedded across and within the myriad contexts of human life that, as Anna Tsing (2015, 3) has observed in her work on the rainforests of Indonesia, are bound together through “the productive friction of global connections.” In “basic empirical research” based on interviews at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), Evan Berry (2014, 269) reported that “content analysis of interview responses suggests that religious actors hold divergent views about the salience of religion to global sustainability politics. The central finding is that the boundary between religious and secular civil groups is a permeable one.” It is more difficult, however, to conceptualize exactly how this (contingent) boundary is permeable and under what circumstances. This is an example of an area where I think attention to Kedarnath is beneficial. Close attention to Kedarnath acts as a focusing lens that allows us to see how places and regions “gather” together (recalling the discussion of Edward Casey in the Introduction) matters of religious, ecological, political, cultural, and economic concern. There is an important implication here. Development processes on the ground may not be wholly “secular,” and attention to the “religious” aspects of how people understand place and environment illustrates this. Politicians in Uttarakhand are responsible to a diverse set of publics that include divine agents and the Himalaya it/themselves (on this point in the Himachal context, see Berti 2009). This way of thinking about Kedarnath does not require a commitment to the idea of religion or religious experience as *sui generis*—that is, as transcendentally given categories that constitute wholly distinct spheres of human experience and activity.

Yet at the same time I make a gentle assertion here that the category of “religion” has a *heuristic* utility. The set of human actors, phenomena, ideas, processes, and materialities that are often denoted by this term powerfully shape the world. The remarks of Peter van der Veer (2014) in his recent comparison of the relationships of religion to the state in India and China are instructive in this regard. Van der Veer notes that “world history more often than not emphasizes economic and politics and in an established secularist fashion underplays the formative role of religion” (9). As a way of moving past this set of analytic limits, he proposes “an emphasis on what I call a ‘syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality.’ I borrow the term ‘syntagmatic’ from Saussurean linguistics and use it in a non-linguistic manner to suggest that these terms are connected, belong to each other, but cannot replace each other. They do not possess stable meanings independently from one another and thus cannot be simply defined separately. They emerge

historically together, imply one another, and function as nodes within a shifting field of power. This syntagmatic chain occupies a key position in nationalist imaginings of modernity” (9). As we have seen in the case of Kedarnath and more broadly Uttarakhand, these “nationalist imaginings of modernity” (as well as their more regional iterations) impinge directly and with increasing magnitude on the conflicting expectations placed on both state and center for the regulation of pilgrimage tourism, the protection of the environment, the stimulation of local and regional economies, and the construction and maintenance of civil and commercial infrastructure connected to pilgrimage tourism. Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Kedarnath in May of 2017. The director (“principal”) of NIM is typically a highly decorated officer from a branch of the Indian military who is chosen by the Ministry of Defense.

Yet—and I think this is part of why Van der Veer’s argument is important—the discursive frame of “nationalist imaginings” is itself not, without further nuance, well prepared to address a situation in which the Himalaya are both divine parent and father-in-law, the world’s youngest and most active mountain range, the water table for much of Asia, the residence of countless place-based deities whose efficacious actions leave traces in our world, the residence and at the same time multiform of Shiva and Shakti, and the host for myriad micro- and regional economies whose parameters are in important ways set by the terrain and the weather, which now themselves bear the mark of human agencies. Holistic approaches have a role to play in understanding this kind of situation because they help find a way past binaries such as human/nature, secular/religious, or science/religion that limit the crafting of sustainable policies that make ecological sense. This book may be of assistance in communicating a sense of what Adrian J. Ivakhiv (2012, 226), building on the work of Isabelle Stengers, Bruno Latour, and Philippe Descola, wants to call the increasingly “cosmopolitical” way that religion, science, nature, and politics (all at multiple scales) are dynamically interdependent, and the way that the world may be moving toward this realization.

In Himalayan contexts, scholars have already been organizing in transregional and multidisciplinary groups to produce precisely these kinds of analyses so that the results can achieve breadth, depth, and at the same time utility and relevance for those whose lives are directly affected. This way of working has become all the more important after not only the floods of 2013 in Uttarakhand but also the major earthquake of 2015 in Nepal whose epicenter lay northwest of Kathmandu. The Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya initiative of the New School’s India-China Institute (and their follow-up “Sacred Himalaya” initiative) make precisely this point. They state their overarching goals in this way: “The project aimed to create an enabling environment for knowledge-sharing and production on the complex role of religion with particular emphasis on sustainable environmental issues” (India-China Institute n.d.). Mabel Denzin Gergan

(2017, 490; 2015), as part of a broader postcolonial theoretical invitation to geographers to think beyond “modern secular tendencies,” has shown “how people’s relationship with a sacred, animate landscape is not easily translatable into the clear goals of environmental politics.” Daniela Berti (2016, 2015) and Debjani Bhattacharyya (2017) have demonstrated a similarly complex set of relations that unfold when divine agents and natural phenomena are potentially viewed as legally significant “persons” in the Indian legal system.

The academic study of religion can offer holistic ways of thinking about such situations that both draw on the deep wells of knowledge and understanding about the natural world found in what some call “religious traditions” and also, by putting specific examples into a more general theoretical conversation, hold partly at a distance the authority and influence of religious actors themselves. These new second-order holisms, approached through ideas of system, flow, place, experience, and network, can offer support for the kinds of interdisciplinary, global, collaborative projects humans need to survive and flourish in the twenty-first century. This book has been an attempt to model the work involved in constructing a bridge from the particular to the general in a way that neglects neither and that models a holistic way of approaching the interrelationships of “religion,” earth, and human experiences of being-in-the-world. The idea of eco-social complexity, an idea that can be understood as a specific form of this type of holism, is a useful way of seeing how the “syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality” connects over time to climate destabilization, environmental change, disaster management, religious tourism, global flows of capital, and competing visions of development. This way of thinking provides a portable metaframework for thinking about ecology and development that seamlessly includes religion. It has two advantages—it models using some tools that natural scientists and social scientists are already familiar with, and it moves past the limiting, inherited, often colonial Western binaries of human/nature, religious/secular, and modern/premodern (“traditional”). It also offers usable application parameters: the analytic category of *place*.

Even though I am clearly insisting that the religious dimensions of place and region be further integrated into broader approaches to questions of policy matters such as sustainable development, this methodological invitation should not be taken as a recommendation that endorses the idea of a Hindu India against the political projects of secularism.¹ It should rather be taken as a descriptive, pragmatic assessment of the fact that the religious resonances of reconstruction in and around Kedarnath are very much bound up with the political, economic, and environmental considerations that can be used to construct durable, beneficial frameworks. These are not fully separable conversations, and the political implications of this fact are difficult to predict. Daniela Berti (2015, 113) made precisely this point when, in her article “Gods’ Rights vs Hydroelectric Projects: Environmental Conflicts and the Judicialization of Nature in India,” she observed that “this mu-

tual association between religion and ecology does not always take a Hindutva turn.” State politicians in Uttarakhand are in a sense responsible to a constituency that includes local deities, local forms of deities and emplaced forms of holiness and divine power who are known beyond the region, and the polyvalent massive *tattva* (suchness) of the Himalaya and rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna.² Mark Elmore (2016) has shown how, in the neighboring *pahari* state of Himachal Pradesh, the very idea of a Himachali “religious” regional identity emerges out of and is in complex interaction with imagined secular modernisms.

Where does this leave us? How are we to view the situation in the Kedarnath valley, and more broadly in Uttarakhand, today? What can be learned? Part of what can be learned is that the complex, overlapping, intersecting relationships among divine powers, natural phenomena, and humans will continue to be a part of whatever shape human life in this region takes. We may also observe that there is something approaching a consensus that Uttarakhand needs to move in more sustainable directions when it can do so in ways that are politically and economically practical in the short and middle term. This can be seen in discussions and recommendations about different forms of pilgrimage and tourism, hydropower, forest management, agriculture, and employment (Chopra 2014). With regard to tourism specifically, in its diverse and changing forms (some of which include *yatra*), public sentiment in Uttarakhand includes the idea that the state needs to create conditions that favor visitor activity that is more decentralized, more attentive to the environmental cost of human activity in Himalayan landscapes, more concerned with local and regional culture, better regulated, and spread throughout the year. Nature and trekking-oriented tourism, cultural tourism, and ecotourism may increase.

However, it would be a mistake to imagine that this new “Bhumi” would be less “Dev.” As I began by saying in the Introduction, one of the main goals of this book is to create a set of feelings, of interpretive attitudes, that will assist readers in thinking and feeling *holistically* about the connections of religion, ecology, development, and disaster, particularly in the Himalaya. This is consonant with the fact that much of my approach is inspired by the tradition of phenomenological anthropology. The complexity of the situation does not reduce to the ecological any more than it does to the political or the economic or the religious. This cautionary note has been sounded before by scholars who have written about Hinduism and ecology (Tomalin 2004; Haberman 2013, 195). It is not yet clear to me whether the Kedarnath situation can be held up as an example of how nature-focused religious sentiments create ecological resilience, a function that several scholars have argued is provided in South Asian contexts by sacred groves (Kent 2013; Gadgil and Guha 1995, 185). Rather, constructions and experiences at Kedarnath of place and god render transparent the complex intertwining of forces that are ubiquitous and forces whose persistent patterns as a whole exceed the

sum of their parts—an example of what Philip Fountain and Levi McLaughlin (2016, 2) termed, in the context of a guest editor's introduction to a special issue of *Asian Ethnology* on religion, disaster relief, and reconstruction, "religion *in situ*." The situation does not reduce to how religious environmental groups can influence policy, how indigenous groups have begun to achieve collective political power in solidarity, or how landscape changes create the conditions for shifts in political advantage. It does not reduce to neo-Gandhian approaches to sustainable development or to the intensely totalizing, recursive, self-transformative world of Shiva *bhakti*. It does not reduce to how nation-states in the Global South approach questions of sustainable development. It may or may not be a case study that provides encouraging resources for doing what John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker (2014) have famously termed "religious ecology," the collaborative investigation of the ecologically productive aspects of lived religious worldviews. Rather, attention to Kedarnath offers a model for what Ivakhiv, during a panel presentation at a weeklong seminar organized by the School for Advanced Research on the Human Experience in Santa Fe, termed a "more complex understanding" (Tucker 2012, 6) of "human relationships with their socionatural and built environments."³ I think that complex understandings of this sort, if sufficiently engaged, facilitate modes of action that can be beneficial for our planetary community.

OF BOUNDARIES AND RESILIENCE

The new three-tier boundary wall constructed behind Kedarnath can, stand as an icon that signals the necessity of approaches based on these sorts of complex understandings. I mused previously that the construction of the boundary wall to protect Kedarnath village could be viewed as a redoubled challenge that asserted the ability of humans to shape the natural environment to their own needs. But the construction of this boundary wall bears closer analysis because it stands as a material testament to the complex character of nature-landscape-human relationships. The wall has three layers. The purpose of the first layer (closest to the glaciers, farthest from the village) is to divert the flows of the Mandakini and Saraswati rivers around Kedarnath while at the same time partially arresting the movement of debris in the water in a way that helps the debris to become part of the wall, thereby strengthening it. The second wall is designed to catch the overflow from the first wall, and it too is designed to arrest debris. Then, closest to the village, a third wall stands ready to catch the overflow from the second.⁴ In other words, the system assumes that it cannot simply stop the flow of floodwater and debris but rather must direct, filter, and join with the aquatic power that might again, someday, descend on the village. One might almost say that it is a human-produced microform of how, in the descent of the Ganga, Shiva's hair filters her otherwise unbearable power—a twenty-first-century example of *sarupata* in which the wall makers become

like the deity. Is this an example of eco-socially aware infrastructure, a piece of the built environment that appropriately acknowledges how resilient humans might fit into this Himalayan situation in a way that honors older understandings about human-river-divine relationships in the Himalaya? Or is it an encouragement to humans in Kedarnath to feel safer than they ought to feel? Could it be both? Does this wall foster hope? If it does, is it sustainable hope?

SUSTAINABILITY AND HOPE

The possibility of hope leads us to a final question of critical global import that my study of Kedarnath allows us to consider: how the idea of sustainability connects to matters of religious importance and how it can be shaped or informed by religious perspectives. After tracing the specific history through which the ideas of “sustainability” and “development” came to be coupled, environmental ethicist Willis Jenkins (2011, 108) prophetically argued that questions of sustainability in the twenty-first century, questions that will in one way or another continue to occupy Uttarakhand for a long time, should proceed in conversation with religious resources if the specific resources in question appear to have the capacity to “sustain hope” for humanity. Jenkins notes that we need a framework that offers criteria for deciding what humans ought to sustain, and that religious frameworks have a great deal of expertise in addressing the existential and moral challenges raised by such a question: “Making sense of sustainability requires at least recognizing the religious responses and questions that this challenge to humanity provokes” (108). My suggestion is that close attention to places of religious significance can teach us a good deal in this regard. More specifically, close attention to places of religious significance can teach us about the material, experiential aspects of sustainable hope. A brief consideration of an excerpt from a July 2013 interview given by the famous environmental activist Sunderlal Bahuguna will show what I mean:

Interviewer: A lot of the damage inflicted is also by locals. Do you think the people of Uttarakhand generally are still concerned about their environment?

Bahuguna: Yes, definitely. There have been so many other movements after Chipko that have been pushing for a local resource-based economy, protecting eco-sensitive zones and our rivers. When has the voice of the rural people ever been heard? The government always claimed their cause was an emotional one but they can't say so after this disaster. This is a lesson and we must change our policies. (Bahuguna 2013)

The term *local resource-based economy* fits in neatly with many of the economic and political discursive frameworks connected to the ideas of sustainable development

that undergird many current conversations about the future directions necessary for Uttarakhand. Terms like this are part of the lexica of environmental studies and geography. But this particular term also extends into Van der Veer's "syntagmatic chain of religion-magic-secularity-spirituality." Bahuguna's exhortation is grounded in his broader sense of a nature-spirituality that is in important ways inspired by the teachings of Gandhi and the wisdom found in the *Bhagavad Gita* and various *Upanishads* (James 2013, 205–25). It is, therefore, reasonable to read Bahuguna's call for more serious government commitment to sustainable policies as a sentiment produced by both a grassroots egalitarian dedication to social and environmental justice and a deep sense of the sacred and interconnected nature of life on earth, which makes it a good example of the kind of "religious response" Jenkins wants to engage.

I want to suggest how Bahuguna's remarks about sustainability might apply to the specific terrain of the Kedarnath valley and might be received by the people who live or visit there. I think that the ambit of the term *local resource-based economy*, viewed from the perspective I have developed in this work, engages the entire material-cultural-political-economic-environmental matrix signified by the term *prakriti* discussed in chapter 6. It includes not just trees but the deities who reside in and own forest areas and who have shrines on mountaintops—deities who themselves occasionally travel on *yatra* along with human devotees from all over the world to be recharged by Shiva in his Kedarnath form, in that place where the Kedarnath *linga* of light emerges from the ground near the source of the Mandakini River. It also includes all the connections (ecological, social, political, economic) among and across divine agents, humans, and the landscape that connects them. I think that this emplaced sense of interconnectedness, what I have been calling the experience of ecosociality in the complex Kedarnath place-system, itself exerts in the experience of humans present in Kedarnath a kind of material weight that is similar to the influence of a physical part of the landscape, such as the Kedarnath boundary wall or the weather experienced on the path. The sheer physicality, the overall somatic load, of the experience of ecosociality in places like Kedarnath should somehow be part of conversations about sustainable forms of hope. This is my critical phenomenological extension of the suggestion of Manuel Vásquez (2011), discussed in the Introduction, that a focus on materiality can lead the study of religion in an ecological direction. The ecosociality of the place is *itself* sensed and felt. It is material. Part of what sustains hope in Uttarakhand, and more broadly in India and South Asia, is the material fact of an ongoing, emergent, dense, thick connectedness to systems and networks of efficacious divine power present in the natural environment—systems and networks with which humans can enter into relation in both day-to-day ways (in the case of residents) and occasional ways (in the case of visitors).

From my conversations with many locals and visitors in Kedarnath valley I got the sense of this kind of thick connectedness as something ubiquitous at the

experiential level even though seldom expressed directly; and it is an important, though difficult to articulate, reason that specific people might choose to engage in some form of environmental activism or choose to act in ecologically beneficial ways. The material fact of connectedness is different from, but a necessary ingredient of, the ideas, concepts, discourses, ideologies, and beliefs, ecologically positive or negative, that emerge from it. It is part of the stuff of our world that can, under the right circumstances, animate movements toward sustainable forms of hope. If it can be termed a form of spirituality or religion, then it is an intensely material spirituality or religion. Scholars of place and pilgrimage in South Asia are to some extent already attentive to the experience of this connectedness (see, for example, Eck 2012; Feldhaus 2003; Sarbadhikary 2015). I want to emphasize the *prakritic* weight of this connectedness and show how it might affect how people experience and engage ecological issues, and how understanding of such matters can be achieved through close attention to specific places.

Kedarnath is a place where, with close attention, it is possible to acquire a sense of the energy and power of this material ecosocial connectedness—to feel where it runs especially close to the surface, how it pulls you toward it, and how it contributes to human experiences of being in the world. I hope that we can then take this way of attending to places of religious importance and apply it to other cases, thereby deepening our collective ecological understanding of how humans fit into the world in ways that can hopefully be leveraged toward a (relatively) hopeful future. This is where I leave the reader: with a portable sense of both the experiential weight of these systems of religious eco-social connection and an understanding of how this complex experiential weight is produced through place.

Jai Kedar.

