

Contested Modernities: Place, Subjectivity, and Himalayan Dam Infrastructures

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The proliferation of hydroelectric projects across the Himalaya leads to the transformation of a wide range of mountain landscapes. While the displacement concerns and environmental impacts involved in the creation of these projects are often recognized (Dharmadhikary 2008), the developmental gains they offer to governments frequently take priority. Amid the environment-versus-development debates that emerge in public and governmental realms, seemingly marginal arguments about the effect such projects have on personal, cultural, and religious terrains have a tendency to be overlooked. In this text, I argue that attention to these latter terrains reveal the subjective implications of dam building. I also argue that when such projects are implemented in seemingly 'remote' (Hussain 2015; Tsing 2005) sections of the Himalaya, attention to these subjectivities reveals competing desires for and against the wider project of modernity.

The case study that orients this discussion revolves around a suite of subjective domains ignited by a hydroelectric project known as the Tehri Dam in the Garhwal Himalaya of India's Uttarakhand State. Tehri was a mammoth dam that took decades to construct. It resulted in a final product that, depending on the eyes of the beholder, is viewed as an engineering triumph, an environmental monstrosity, or an affront to regionally important lifeways. In my examination of the dam's implementation, I first focus on the controversies that arose as it was being developed. This is followed by an examination of how people adapt in the aftermath of the dam's completion.

The data from which this discussion draws combines engagement with published literature and the insights obtained while doing ethnographic research in the Garhwal Himalaya. The bulk of fieldwork, constituting roughly fifteen months of time spent in the region, was conducted in 2008-2009. Preliminary and follow up visits additionally inform a good portion of the observations that are featured in this text. The arguments presented are also influenced by a suite of established conversations in Himalayan studies, along with points of inquiry developed and fostered through investigations of the Trans-Himalayas that are featured throughout the edited volume in which this text is situated. Of particular relevance are debates over the role and scope of modernity for understanding how, and why, the changes taking place in diverse mountain regions can be usefully seen through the lens of Trans-Himalayan investigations. The theme of modernity is evident across the contributions of this edited volume, and they emerge as especially prominent in the work of Cheng, Diemberger, Galipeau, Michaud, Turner, Li Yunxia, and others.

Thinking with Trans-Himalayan Modernities

Modernity is significant to the particularities of the discussion that follows because dam building is often presented as a practice that epitomises some of modernity's foundational mentalities (Murphy 2011; Kaika 2001). Following the logic of select scholars (Esteva 1992; Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995), modernity has links to European

Enlightenment thinking that positions humankind's progressive material and intellectual advancement in a forward trajectory that leaves behind an inferior past. In this approach to modernity, the values of individuality, rationality, and the domination of nature were and are emphasised. With this drive to harness nature's erstwhile 'wildness' through human ingenuity (and for human benefit), hydroelectric projects have served as highly potent symbols of modernity's reach—and this is especially true for countries like India (Gadgil and Guha 1992).

Across the globe, efforts to realise the goal of managing and manipulating nature were eventually given labels such as 'development'. Once this word took root, and its manifestations were felt in Europe and North America, it facilitated a mandate to bring development to the 'underdeveloped' (Escobar 1995). What is more, the birth of such powerful discourses produced subjects in need of the type of development exemplified by industrialised countries (*ibid.*). It is for such reasons that modernity is often brought into discussions of development, which is sometimes called modernisation. These seemingly similar words—modernity and modernisation—are related yet distinct. Whereas modernity is 'a programmatic vision for social change and progress' that is linked to industrialisation and capitalism, modernisation can be understood as an ongoing process that occurs 'only after industrialisation and the expansion of the capitalist world market' (Kaika 2005: 4). In what follows, I refer to modernity when modernist 'visions for social change and progress' come into play (*ibid.*). The interlocutors from whom I draw are more likely to speak of modernisation, which refers to the manifestation of such visions.

Scholars have offered rebuttals, challenges, and modifications in response to the critique of development as a project of modernity. Some, for instance, question the perception that the West has a monopoly on individuality, rationality, and the dominance of nature. Gidwani (2002) is among those that criticise what he considers the Orientalist logic of poststructuralist scholarship by arguing that, despite their attacks on Eurocentrism and modernisation theory, such scholars remain trapped within the 'straightjacket' of Eurocentric, modernist thinking (12). In so saying, he points to archival evidence to demonstrate that 'modern' rationalising processes within economy and society have arisen at different times, over different scales, and in different cultural forms in various regions of the world autonomously of European influence (*ibid.*). Others complicate the monolithic portrayal of modernist thinking by asserting that India provides examples of 'regional modernities' because diverse ethnic, religious, social, and geo-political variations interact with development projects across distinct topographical regions (Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal, 2003). Similarly, Arce and Long (2000) call for modernity to be understood as a 'heterogeneous dynamism' (3). This term flags how the ideas and actions associated with modernity can be appropriated and re-embedded in situated practices. The resulting fragmentation and dispersal of modernity, they argue, enables 'constantly proliferating modernities' (*ibid.*: 1) that merit close examination.

These assertions set a persuasive basis in which we can argue for recognition of a Trans-Himalayan modernity (or modernities). Quite simply, a Trans-Himalayan approach to modernity considers how the logics, discourses, and practices associated with modernity are adopted and modified across diverse regions of the Himalaya. In this Trans-Himalayan zone, it is likely that modernity is likely to be questioned and tested via everyday practice, as well as through wider spheres of social and political contestations.

It is within this context of contested Trans-Himalayan modernities that I now present the struggle over dams in the Garhwal Himalaya.ⁱ As I discuss when examining the case of the Tehri dam, the controversy was made complex by a suite of environmental, cultural, and religious concerns for damming the Ganga (Ganges) River on the one hand, and by the desires for development that some people expressed on the other. My approach focuses on the ways in which residents—compelled by diverse subjectivities and differing enactments of agency—navigate development projects, the project of development and modernisation, and contested ideologies of modernity. Scholars such as Campbell (2011) argue that a focus on subjectivities, as opposed to culture, ‘...offers better possibilities for observing agency, knowledge, social interaction (including domination and resistance), experience[s] of change, and the deliberate negotiation of relationships that have environmental effects (ibid.: 188). While I do not discuss the relevance of Zomia thinking that Van Schendel (2002), Scott (2009), Shneiderman (2010), Michaud (this volume), and Smyer Yü (this volume) examine, readers might consider the ways in which the arguments I make link back to the notions (and terrains) of protected alterity that is often invoked with the term Zomia.

Conflicting Development Logics and Resource Perspectives

Hydroelectric development, as an engineering feat and a symbol of progress, is tightly wound up in fervent debates about Indian approaches to development and modernisation. India's development trajectory is well documented, with ample discussion of the rationales behind the paths taken (Harriss 1998). Early on after independence in 1947, the leadership decided that they could most expediently overcome the years of subjugation under British rule by becoming a world power (Nayar 2001). It was for this reason that, in the aftermath of World War II, industrialisation was on the mind of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and his staff. Such leaders argued that it was necessary to emulate the West intellectually through the infusion of modern science as well as through the material practices of development (Gadgil & Guha 1992: 183). And so, beginning first with a socialist pattern of economic development, the government emphasised building economic self-sufficiency through state investment in social services, infrastructure, industry, and commerce. Influenced by the perception that industrialisation would lift all proverbial boats, including those of India's poor, Nehru encouraged the construction of dams across the country and famously equated them with modern temples. Over time, the signs of growing wealth in urban India influenced the desires of India's rural inhabitants, including residents of the Himalaya. For such people, the hope is that the secondary or tertiary benefits of development and industrialisation will make them ‘developed’.ⁱⁱ It is in this context that the Tehri dam controversies must be situated.

While the debate over the Tehri dam earned substantial media coverage in India, it has not received as much attention from international scholars as have dam related controversies such as the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada River in western India. Even when the opposition to the Tehri dam attracted scholarly attention, concerns over population displacement and environmental impact were often the focus (Jayal 1998, Singh 1992). Less commented upon were the cultural and religious concerns related to the dam's implementation. For this reason, I discuss how and why devotees worried that

the project would alter connections with the sacred waters on which the dam was to be situated: the Bhagirathi tributary of the Ganga, a river revered by millions of Hindus.

The Ganga, honoured as a living Goddess with purifying and healing powers, has inspired millions over the millennia to sing its praises and worship at its banks (Darian 1978). In one account from the Hindu classic the Ramayana by Valmiki (Sattar 1996), the origin of the Goddess Ganga is associated with her concession to descend from the heavens in liquid form to purify the ashes of King Sagara's 60,000 sons who perished at the hands of a powerful sage. After practicing great austerities and deep meditation, Bhagiratha, a descendant of King Sagara, convinced the Ganga to come down to earth and carve out a path leading across the country. Eventually, the Ganga's flow through India took with it the ashes of Bhagiratha's ancestors. Recognising the river as a bridge to heaven, Hindus offer the ashes of their deceased to the Ganga in the belief that she (the Goddess) will take their souls to a celestial resting place. The Ganga also plays a vital role in Hindu ceremonies marking everyday ritual as well as lifecycle events.

Perceptions of the Ganga's cultural and religious significance are important to engage in development debates. Many anthropologists are involved in efforts to understand the value of human relationships to natural entities with a growing focus on water (Alley 2002). A reminder of such scholarship is that social scientists should pay more attention to the lives of nonhuman entities. 'We tap into literatures on symbols and meanings, on class and colonialism, on commodification and the penetration of capitalism,' writes Anna Tsing (2004), 'but these literatures do little to help us understand nature: its diversity, its power and constraints, or its multifaceted way of entering human histories' (173). A better approach, she argues, is to look at the historical and cultural variety of relations between people, plants, animals, and natural entities.

The Tehri Dam in the Context of Development

Despite the river's symbolism and significance to Hindus, the implementation of the Tehri dam on the Ganga's Himalayan flow was positioned as part of a nationalist project of development. The dam, standing at 260.5 meters (855 feet) was designed to be the highest in Asia and the fifth tallest in the world. Its designers and proponents boasted that the dam could generate upwards of 1000 MW, enough to annually generate 6532 million units of energy while providing water to irrigate 270,000 hectares of land. The dam was also designed to provide 270 million gallons of water to industrialising locations downstream with 162 million gallons going to New Delhi to service the city's residents.ⁱⁱⁱ

Before and during the dam's construction, several feasibility assessments were conducted. Several of the reports that assessed the viability of the dam cautioned that it should be abandoned (Rao 1992). Among the major concerns was the Tehri dam's location in a seismic zone (Jayal 1998). If the dam were to break, critics claimed, the resulting flood would inundate the two downstream cities of Rishikesh and Haridwar within an hour's time. Another fear was that the reservoir created by the dam would induce seismic activity, a phenomenon ostensibly observed in 30 percent of dams within the height range of 150-200 meters (Dogra 1992: 82). Others pointed out that the dam's implementation alone would be akin to disaster, as it would destroy the habitations and livelihoods of some 100,000 people living in Tehri and in 112 adjacent villages.

In response to these concerns, environmentalists voiced opposition. Many of those who participated in the debate over Tehri dam accepted the need for development projects in order to provide forest resources, roads, minerals, and other items to meet the demands of a growing country. Their vision of development was one that was methodically phased, small scale, and based on precautionary principles. The suggestions for development 'alternatives' included prescriptions for reforestation; soil and water conservation; the strengthening of agriculture and animal husbandry; and the implementation of measures to reduce landslides in the mountainous area.

A prominent feature of the environmentalist approach argued that development projects should be pursued with the intention of promoting 'sustainable ecologies'. Such positions emphasised the Ganga as a vital resource needed to support a healthy ecosystem. Environmentalists saw the Tehri dam as counter to the sustainability goal as the reservoir would potentially result in the loss of fertile soil and the phenomena of increased landslides due to added moisture in the adjacent land and air. Biodiversity, it was argued, would also suffer with a corresponding impact on social justice because, 'Biodiversity and social justice are closely linked to each other. Sustainability becomes meaningless unless it is laden with the value of justice, not only for human society, but, indeed, for all living beings' (Singh 1998: 62). Despite these environmental critiques, the Planning Commission approved the project. The need for the dam was set within a mandate to provide drinking water, irrigation, and electricity to fuel the country's growth.

The decision to move forward with the Tehri dam prompted protests. Dogra (1992) presents the early campaigns as organised and effective. The movement began officially in 1978 with the creation of a dam opposition organisation known the Tehri Dam Opposition Struggle Committee (Tehri Bandh Virodhi Sangarsh Samiti or TBVSS). Virendra Dutt Saklani was the first Chairman of the committee. Under his leadership, the initial years of protest saw the collection of substantial amounts of dam-related information by TBVSS from which education campaigns, petitions, and 'massive' demonstrations arose (Dogra 1992: 60-63; Mukerji 1997: 15). Over the years, however, support dwindled as the movement failed to make headway and the dam came to be increasingly regarded as a fait accompli. A few individuals, however, opposed the dam to the very end. Among the most notable figures involved was Sunderlal Bahuguna. It is his speeches and writings that are readily accessible and from which I draw some of my observations about the dam's symbolic and subjective implications.

Sunderlal is one of India's leading environmental activists. He was greatly influenced by Vinod Bhave and Mirabehn, two of the most prominent followers of Gandhi (James 2014). Sunderlal adopted the Gandhian way of life as a youth by emphasising spirituality above the acquisition and consumption of material goods. His approach supported small-scale industries and the promotion of rural and 'traditional' Indian livelihoods. Due to his involvement with the Chipko movement,^{iv} Sunderlal was already a visible character on the national scene by the time construction on the Tehri dam began in 1978. This made him a target of praise as well as critique. Some claim that he was a part of a 'rural elite' whose protests gained audiences through 'simple, populist narratives that pitted peasants against the state and markets' without adequately addressing the range of opinions about development in the mountains (Rangan 2004: 382). While I recognise these critiques, I cite Sunderlal's narratives because they are still relevant; they speak to the subjectivity and agency of a highly influential individual.

In his opposition to the dam, Sunderlal combined political experience and a Gandhian approach of non-violent dissent to write articles, meet with prominent political figures, hold town meetings, embark on long *padyatras* (walking journeys that go from village to village to raise awareness about issues), and endure extended fasts.^v Reminding others of the project's aim to provide water and electricity for the urban residents of New Delhi hundreds of kilometers away, Sunderlal and other members of the opposition framed the dam as taking away from rather than adding to the Himalayan region. As Sunderlal himself explained of his efforts, '...I am sitting with a red danger signal like a railway watchman near the Tehri dam site and am crying at the top of my voice, 'Beware! Danger, danger!'' He continued by qualifying, 'This danger has come under the attractive robe of development' (Bahuguna 1997: 192).

Differing from the singularity of the environmentalist arguments, Sunderlal and his peers opposed the dam for reasons of ecology as well as religion. One of the central reasons for opposing the Tehri dam was the threat it posed to the river's deity. The Goddess-centric arguments predominated in the speeches and writings of people like Sunderlal. The defense of the river as a Goddess recognises that, in the Hindu tradition, God takes multiple forms. Some of these, like rivers, are observable in nature. Importantly, the Goddess Ganga is also equated as a motherly figure that gives to her children unconditionally and with unending love (Sunderlal 1997; Alley 2002; Haberman 2006). In one interview, Sunderlal described the Ganga by saying, 'Ganga is a Goddess because like a mother she feeds everyone. She is always prepared to come for her children, but when you dam a river and change its course, you deny people and other beings access to their mother' (Haberman 2006: 71). According to such a perspective, the Tehri dam threatened to break this connection between humans and the Goddess/Mother.

In one description, Sunderlal positioned the Tehri dam as a manifestation of evil: 'The dam is a battleground between the gods and demons. Dams are the expression of demonic power. The dam will kill the goddess because the water will not be flowing. Only flowing water is alive; dammed water is not. The dam will take the energy out of the water. The dam will kill the *shakti* [divine life force] of the river.' (72). The strong language used by Sunderlal shows how significant he perceived the battle against the dam to be. Arguing on behalf of the Goddess, the fight was presented as one between her and the 'demons', which he saw as forces of 'materialistic civilisation'. Despite the strong language, people like Sunderlal were not 'anti' development. In arguing for the implementation of small hydro-electric schemes, Sunderlal himself once wrote, 'Not a single source from which power can be generated should be left untapped' (1997: 23). The issue was thus over the scale of development that should be pursued.

When emphasising his concern for the Himalaya, Sunderlal equated the success of the Tehri dam opposition to the very survival of the region. Others agreed. Pritish Nandy (1992), echoing Sunderlal's sentiments, wrote that a country willing to destroy its rivers, mountains and forests has nothing left to live for. 'If the Tehri dam is indeed built,' he elaborated, 'if these two rivers are strangled by the neck till they choke into a godless and dead reservoir, we shall have one reason less to have children, one reason less to hope. If the murder of the two rivers and the wonderful green valley through which they now pass is development, what remains thereafter?' (ibid.: 11). Another writer similarly argued that, '...the river worshipped as 'the holy mother Ganga' represents an apex of human experience through times immemorial based on the symbiosis between mankind

and life support systems' (Bahadur 1998: xx). At stake in such sentiments is the 'creative destruction' (Kaika 2001: 5) caused by the modernisation that the dam promised to usher into the Garhwal Himalaya. The modernisation-driven efforts to control 'nature' through technology, human labor, and capital investment, were contested on the grounds that they would disrupt and even destroy a precious entity far more important than what the dam promised to offer in return.

Post Development Encounters in Garhwal: Sunderlal's Perspective

The Tehri dam was completed in 2006 despite the opposition campaigns. Around that time, on June 10, 2006, I met with Sunderlal Bahuguna near the project site. In the aftermath of the dam's completion, as Tehri succumbed to the water, Sunderlal and his wife, Vimala, moved into a house on the side of the hill that overlooks the reservoir. A two story building with wide verandas, the house was transformed into an ashram—an abode for rest, work, and spiritual growth. From the veranda, the hillside view takes in the girth of the reservoir's first few kilometers. At the time of my visit, the vista included abandoned buildings, junkyards of scrap metal, mounds of soil, and the idle earth-moving machines that were used to turn the river basin into a cratered wasteland that supplied the 'rock and earth fill' structure of the Tehri dam.

Although the day was warm and sunny, the house felt gloomy in its perch on the mountainside. In contrast to the sound of heavy machinery and rushing waters that I heard in my visit of 18 months prior (in late 2004), a conspicuous silence weighed upon the scene. The only distinguishable noises were the occasional chirping of a passing bird and the sounds of distant cars moving along the road above that passes through the government-built town of New Tehri, which is a concrete settlement created to house a portion of the resettled. Contemplating the transformation from Sunderlal's veranda, the lack of noise punctuated the sense of change. The river no longer flowed freely and the dam's turbines were scheduled to start the following month.

I exchanged pleasantries with Sunderlal before asking him what he was doing to pass the time. He responded in Hindi: 'Nothing... I sit here. I watch the river.' The statement of inaction was perhaps an exaggeration coming from a man that continued to argue on behalf of the displaced for compensation and for the importance of reforestation. In light of this, his emphasis on immobility seemed to underline defeat. While saying that he watched the river, he pointed to the waters of the filling reservoir. After this, Sunderlal added a comment I had to later reply dozens of times on my recording device to convince myself that he uttered. 'Ganga,' he declared, 'has died.' After he spoke, he took another look out onto the reservoir in front of us and shrugged his shoulders. Supporting the idea that he thought the Goddess was affected by the project, Sunderlal had earlier performed a *shradda* ritual along the Ganga after the dam was completed (Haberman 2006). The ritual is a funeral rite that a dutiful son performs on the occasion of his mother's death.



<Insert figure 1 around here>

Figure 1: A Downstream View of Tehri Reservoir, 25 November 2009; Photo by Author

For people like Sunderlal, what was lost was not only access to a free-flowing and vibrant Ganga, it was also a sense of connection to place. Sunderlal's statements of connection to the Ganga, and of the need to protect culturally significant locations such as Tehri, may seem idealised to critics but they echo commentary in some of the existing scholarship. Expanding on Basso's (1996) argument that wisdom sits in places, Escobar (2001) posits that culture sits in places as 'the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices' (152). For some, entities like rivers and mountains are seen as 'natural' boundaries that help demarcate particular places in ways that are nonetheless dynamic. Raffles (2002), in his work in Igarape Guariba in Brazil, points out that rivers, which help constitute borders, are also places, albeit ones that are, 'as mobile as can be' (182). These comments point to the fluidity of place and the possibility that rivers are mutable places. They also indicate how place-disrupting development projects can transform patterns of interaction with rivers in ways that impact cultural and religious ways of recognising their value.

Even as important as the acknowledgement of place-based connection and loss can be, it is also critical to note that development projects are also place-based and involved in the process of place-making and place-altering (Gidwani 2002). This is a point I discovered to have resonance when I moved up the river to study the conflict over three new dams from 2008-2010. As I asked about the impact of Tehri dam and of the Tehri reservoir, I found that not everyone felt the same sense of loss as Sunderlal. The issue, I came to realise, was one of divergent place-based knowledges and experiences with the Ganga. Sitting at the base of the dam and the start of the reservoir, Sunderlal had immediate knowledge of the project's impacts and of the loss of place as the historic town

of Tehri slipped from sight under the rising waters. Upstream, however, the impact of the reservoir was slow in manifesting. The reservoir grew from 2006 to 2007 and it wasn't until 2008-2009 that the full extent of the damage was realised.

Post Development Encounters in Garhwal: Additional Perspectives

As I went about fieldwork upstream from the Tehri dam, I documented how the region's residents slowly came to know and experience the place-altering impacts of the reservoir. At first, several of my upstream interlocutors expressed enthusiasm for the Tehri project as a vital contributor to India's development and economic growth. This sentiment was expressed to me by lay residents as well as by Hindu-identified spiritualists such as sadhus and swamis. One particular person, a prominent Swami, even confessed to me in 2009 that at first he had been against the completion and imposition of the Tehri dam but that he ultimately changed his mind because a 'little sacrifice' has to be made for the betterment of the nation. On this point, he reflected on his experience with a much smaller project that was implemented on the same river in the 1980s. There was an initial uproar when it was completed, he explained, and people complained that their access to the river would be blocked. That was twenty years ago, the Swami noted. In the years since, he came to believe that Hindu 'culture' was ultimately unaffected. Everyone still has the same faith in Ganga, he argued, and they continue to worship it as before. This qualified exception to the imposition of development illustrates how certain groups can be 'tactically selective about modernity' (Michaud 2012: 1854) rather than demonstrating the unequivocal resistance to modernity (and its products) that some might expect (Sivaramakrishnan 2005).

I documented similarly resigned arguments and subjective opinions on the value of Himalayan dams closer to the rising waters of the reservoir. Tellingly, these changed over time as the landscape began to transform. In a village at the far end of the reservoir known as Chinyalisaur, the waters engulfed huge swaths of land that destroyed agricultural fields, homes, and Hindu temples. As a result, livelihoods were jeopardised and there was an uptick of outmigration as young and middle-aged men migrated to urban areas in the Indian plains and abroad in search of income opportunities that were lost to the rising waters. As a commentator indicated when discussing the situation, Chinyalisaur residents equated the encroaching waters with a refashioning of place. When asked about the location in which they reside, some quipped that what was once Chinyalisaur no longer existed. Instead, they contended that they were now 'residents of Tehri reservoir.' This discursive turn reflects changing subjectivities of not only place but of the value of development projects such as Tehri. It also shows the evolution of perspectives as initial reactions met development/modernity with 'reluctant compliance' (Michaud 2012: 1861) before morphing into discursive acts of everyday resistance.

In one exchange in Chinyalisaur, the owner of a roadside restaurant listed the fields and nearby villages that were subsumed by the reservoir when queried about the impact of the Tehri dam. He pointed out towards different spots along the river's flow as he itemised the locations disturbed, not looking up from the pot of chai he was making. I asked the obvious question: And how do people in Chinyalisaur feel about the change? 'Who could be happy with it?' he retorted. 'It is all for the government—they are the ones who benefited. The poor got nothing.' When I pressed for him to explain what the

government stood to gain, he described the ways in which the energy production operates in the mountains, equating the system with a ‘circus’. The description was meant to criticise not only how the dam building reshaped the mountains, but also the intricate system of energy distribution which determines that those closest to the sites of energy creation benefit least from its production. Whatever electricity is made, he explained, it is immediately sent down the mountain to Rishikesh or Roorkee, cities in the Indian plains. It is only after the energy has been accounted for in the plains that a little of it comes back up for use in the mountains. The vast majority of the electricity made within their reach is sent throughout India. Referring to the frequent blackouts in the mountains, he declared that, most of the time, the people of Chinyalisaur are ‘left in the dark.’



<Insert Figure 2 around here>

Figure 2: Chinyalisaur, Looking Upstream, 19 January 2014

In discussions along the Tehri reservoir during follow up visits in 2010, 2012, and 2014 people continued to express the ways in which the reservoir had reshaped and rezoned the landscape. This process was not definitive or final. As the waters rose and retreated with the passing seasons, the reservoir continually refashioned the land. Sometimes previously untouched fields, homes, and temples were subsumed. At other times, the reservoir rose only to claim the remnants of dead trees and dilapidated buildings that, on the second or third time of being swallowed by the waters, disappeared when the level went back down. It was not only the borders of villages and towns that were remade; People also expressed sentiments in which they positioned themselves to be on the very borders of development. In the way some interlocutors explained it, the signs and symbols of development were everywhere around them and yet they had personally realised very little of the promise that was erstwhile associated with the projects.

This borderland sentiment is now part and parcel of the emerging subjectivities shaped by life along the Tehri reservoir. This locationally specific way of life is part of the in-between spaces created in the post-development present wherein the past ways of

engaging with the landscape are no longer fully viable while at the same time the hoped-for results of development have not yet materialised. This does not mean that an 'erasure of place' has occurred, as that would be a phrase untrue to the always-in-production nature of place and places (Massey 1994). Indeed, what is remarkable about such post-development landscapes is the ways in which people maintain continuity with past practices while adjusting to the restrictions and opportunities that are continually arising.

Concluding Remarks: Multiple Subjectivities and Contested Modernities

Rather than reifying the oppositional stance of a high-profile figure such as Sunderlal Bahuguna, I have drawn from his example to show both what was perceived to be at stake as well as the modernist rationales that led to the Tehri dam's completion. I combined this with observations of post-development encounters to demonstrate that dams are capable of reshaping landscapes in ways that influence subjectivities. The call in making this assertion is to avoid the inclination to essentialise pre-development landscapes or to unduly denigrate or romanticise post-development landscapes. As dams and other development projects creep evermore into otherwise remote locations in the Himalaya, the need is to illuminate how these projects are contested as well as how, and why, they are embraced (albeit with reservations and qualifications). As Gardner and Lewis (1996) argue, the social scientists studying development should continually question why development manifests the way it does, as well as how it could be designed and implemented otherwise (156). This position is grounded in the fact that many people do desire the life improvements promised by development but that their relation to it is not static. In other parts of the Himalaya, such as in Nepal, the driving rationales can include imaginaries of the 'hydropower futures' that produce compliance and acquiesce with development projects whilst people simultaneously work to turn the implementation of dams towards their personal benefit (Lord 2014).

The complex terrains of subjectivity and agency that manifest in relation to dam building in the Himalaya is not an embrace of an unquestioned development project within a hegemonic notion of modernity. While some of the perspectives and subjectivities documented in relation to dam building on the Ganga were seemingly at odds, commonalities in the diverse positions discussed point towards a striving for regionally appropriate means of development and modernisation in what we might call the Trans-Himalayas. My interlocutors did this while upholding the value of past socio-cultural practices while also recognising the technological improvements born of science (even if this was an argument in favor of small rather than large dams). Such assertions extend from the arguments of Arce and Long (2000), who believe that the ideas and practices of modernity are appropriated and re-embedded in place, combined with calls that we include in our analyses the regional specificities, multi-scalar processes, and diverse degrees of agency that lead to particular outcomes (Gidwani 2002; Shivramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Sinha 2008).

Given the dynamism of the subjectivities and agencies that manifest in relation to Himalayan dams, the challenge for development scholars and proponents alike is to continue the work of understanding how development intersects with the diverse ways of engaging in the world made evident at project implementation sites. Social scientists can contribute by examining the ecological cultural, social, and religious implications of

development while also documenting and helping to amplify other, and perhaps 'alternative', visions of development and modernity. Examples of entry points for such analyses might include Blaser's (2004) approach, which looks at the 'life projects' that disrupt assumptions regarding the universality of development while highlighting the unique experiences that 'thread' together connections between self and place (26). Other avenues of exploration include Michaud's (2012) suggestion that we look for the ways that people meet modernity, and potentially push back against it, in the 'small acts of everyday life' as opposed to the 'grand schemes' they are thought to pursue (1861).

As for the impacts of development projects past, one may recall the adage, 'What goes up must come down'. With the dam's potential lifespan of 30 to 100 years, and in the perspective of time's expanse, the river that once flowed freely may do so again. In the interim, the need is to continue examining modernity's influence alongside the diverse ways of being and behaving in the world that persist. By highlighting the diverse voices that alternately embrace or criticise development, we keep open multiple approaches to imagine the ways forward. As a final frontier for hydroelectric development in Asia, the Himalaya are a site of especially robust debates that can be usefully explored to understand how former ways of engaging with the region's varied landscapes are changing and, as a result, how subjectivities are continually reshaped.

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ⁱ Garhwal was once a 'princely state' run out of the township of Tehri and governed by a series of Shah Kings from the early 1800's until roughly two years after the date of Indian independence. Although the British did not have an overt presence in Tehri Garhwal during their reign of India, they briefly acquired administrative rule over the region, a feat that resulted in increased resource extraction from the hills for use in the development of colonial infrastructure (Agrawal 2004).

ⁱⁱ Nanda Shrestha (1995) discusses the significance this term has on development in Nepal (which is translated as *bikasi* in Nepali or *vikasi* in Hindi).

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information, please visit the THDC's website at <http://thdc.nic.in/> and also the International Rivers Network at <http://www.irn.org/>.

^{iv} A pivotal moment in India's environmental history, the Chipko movement began in 1973. It was the result of efforts by mountain residents, many of them women, to prevent deforestation. To understand the mythic proportions that Chipko took on after blocking the destruction of forested areas, see Ramachandra Guha's 1989 publication, *The Unquiet Woods*.

^v Records indicate that Sunderlal took several fasts of more than 40 days in duration over the two and a half decades of resistance to the dam.