

ACCEPTED VERSION

Georgina Drew

The cultural politics of development in an Indian hydropower conflict: an exploration of 'fame-seeking' activists and movement-abstaining citizens

South Asia, 2017; 40(4):810-826

© 2017 South Asian Studies Association of Australia

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in South Asia on 2 October 2017 available online:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00856401.2017.1373386>

PERMISSIONS

<http://authorservices.taylorandfrancis.com/sharing-your-work/>

Accepted Manuscript (AM)

As a Taylor & Francis author, you can post your Accepted Manuscript (AM) on your personal website at any point after publication of your article (this includes posting to Facebook, Google groups, and LinkedIn, and linking from Twitter). To encourage citation of your work we recommend that you insert a link from your posted AM to the published article on [Taylor & Francis Online](#) with the following text:

“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in [JOURNAL TITLE] on [date of publication], available online: [http://www.tandfonline.com/\[Article DOI\]](http://www.tandfonline.com/[Article DOI]).”

For example: *“This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis Group in Africa Review on 17/04/2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/12345678.1234.123456>.”*

N.B. Using a real DOI will form a link to the Version of Record on [Taylor & Francis Online](#).

The AM is defined by the [National Information Standards Organization](#) as:
“The version of a journal article that has been accepted for publication in a journal.”

This means the version that has been through peer review and been accepted by a journal editor. When you receive the acceptance email from the Editorial Office we recommend that you retain this article for future posting.

[Embargoes apply](#) if you are posting the AM to an institutional or subject repository, or to academic social networks such as Mendeley, ResearchGate, or Academia.edu.

18 June 2019

Title Page

The Cultural Politics of Development in an Indian Hydropower
Conflict: An Exploration of 'Fame-Seeking' Activist and Movement-
Abstaining Citizens

(Pre-proof draft, accepted in May of 2017)

Final copy published in hardcopy format in:

South Asia: A Journal of South Asian Studies Vol. XL, No. 4, (2017)
pp. 810-826.

GEORGINA DREW, PHD
SENIOR LECTURER
ANTHROPOLOGY AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE
ADELAIDE, SA, AUSTRALIA

georgina.drew@adelaide.edu.au

The Cultural Politics of Development in an Indian Hydropower Conflict: An Exploration of ‘Fame-Seeking’ Activist and Movement-Abstaining Citizens

This article examines the cultural politics of hydroelectric development that citizens and social movements produce. Focusing on contentious and competing discourses, the text investigates the charge that lead activists fighting against a series of dams set along the Indian Himalayan reaches of the River Ganga were motivated by the self-interested pursuit of name recognition. Through the study of these critiques— which emerged over the course of an ethnographic research project spanning from 2008 to 2009—the article lends insight to an often-overlooked sociological phenomenon: the issue of why more people *do not* join dam opposition movements in contemporary India. ¹

Keywords: Activism, Social Movements, Discourse and Cultural Politics, Hydroelectric Development, Hydropower Conflicts, Ganga, Hindu Faith, Indian Himalaya, Garhwal

Word Count: 9,150 (Not including title, abstract, and acknowledgments)

¹ Thanks to the kind efforts of Sara Shneiderman, an early version of this text was presented at a co-sponsored talk for the Center for India and South Asia Research and the Department of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (UBC) in January of 2016. The author expresses gratitude for the thoughtful comments of the audience members at the UBC event, for the helpful suggestions of the blind reviewers of South Asia, and for the expert feedback of the special issue editors Patrik Oskarsson and Siddharth Sareen. Additional thanks go to Kama Maclean and Vivien Seyler for help in producing this text, and the special volume of which it is a part.

Funding: The research for this article was supported by the Fulbright Hays Program, the National Science Foundation [grant 0851193] and the Australian Research Council [grant DE160101178].

'Survival of the fittest, or in other words, 'might is right', describes India's current approach to dam building. The less fit—the poor, the Adivasis [tribals], the politically and economically weak—are being forced to pay the price of development. And the power of the fittest—the rich, the elite, the state machinery—is being used to extract this price, as has been the case in previous decades. We have learnt nothing.'²

In 2007, a periodical known as *Himal Southasian* published a special issue on the politics of dam building in the Himalaya. With a subtitle that read, 'In the Shadow of the Dam: What Have We Learned', the special issue is representative of many debates that took place over previous decades, as well as in subsequent years. The submissions chronicle various cases of hydropolitics in South Asia as well as a number of people's movements against large dams that span the Himalayan regions of Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Numerous contributors lament that past calls for public participation in development planning, for rigorous cost-benefit analyses, and for post-clearance environmental monitoring have gone unheeded. Shripad Dharmadhikary, quoted in the above insert, points out that the price for these projects has often been paid by the people displaced, and the communities downstream, as well as by the natural environment. Offering scathing commentary, Dharmadhikary further contends:

Even as evidence mounts against large dams, New Delhi is un-inclined to respond meaningfully. Perhaps this reluctance stems from the fact that part of the answer would be to stop building many of the proposed large dams, not to mention relinquishing some of its decision-making power to affected people, and claiming less direct control over the country's resources. As such, no real answers have been offered, and the authorities have instead chosen to bypass or ride roughshod over those who protest or propose alternatives.³

² Shripad Dharmadhikary, 'Have River, Will Dam', in *Himal Southasian*, Vol. 20, no. 9 (Lalitpur, Nepal: The Southasia Trust, 2007), pp. 33.

³ Ibid.

It is precisely because the marginalisation of dam opponents and activists is well established in existing hydropower debates that I begin with critical commentary on the politics of dam building. While there have been select periods of decline in the construction of hydroelectric projects in India,⁴ corporations and governmental offices continue to insist on building dams for reasons of flood control; for water supply transfers for agriculture, commerce and household use; and for electricity.⁵ When scholars point out the opposition to those projects, however, their narratives sometimes frame the politics of dam building in ways that pit the 'powerful' against the 'powerless'.⁶ Such discourses paint images of like-minded 'communities' who ostensibly agree on the ills of particular projects, but who are nonetheless forced to accommodate them when government bodies insist that they must be built.⁷ Without undermining the value of dam critiques, or of the positive potential of people's movements,⁸ this article seeks to infuse the discourses that circulate about the politics of hydroelectric development with additional perspectives in order to move beyond the powerful-versus-powerless trope of dam conflict.⁹ These additional perspectives help us

⁴ Sanjeev Khagram, *Dams and Development: Transnational Struggles for Water and Power* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

⁵ Marcus Nüsser considers the dominant dam building models to be part of Asia's 'technological hydroscares'. See: Marcus Nüsser, 'Technological Hydroscares in Asia: The Large Dams Debate Reconsidered', in Marcus Nüsser (ed), *Large Dams in Asia: Contested Environments between Technological Hydroscares and Social Resistance* (New York: Springer, 2014).

⁶ See, for instance: Shripad Dharmadhikary, *Mountains of Concrete: Dam Building in the Himalayas* (Berkeley, CA: International Rivers, 2008); Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha, 'Ecological Concerns and the Environmental Movement in India,' in *Development and Change* Vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 101-136.

⁷ Some of the literature on the opposition to the dams on India's Narmada River is framed in this way. See: William F. Fisher, 'Development and Resistance in the Narmada Valley', in *Sustainable Development: Struggling over India's Narmada River*, William F. Fisher, ed. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996) pp. 3-46. Amita Baviskar and Judith Whitehead, by contrast, have crafted more nuanced understandings of the multiple publics and politics that were in play in the fight over dams along the Narmada [See: Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River: Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995); Judith Whitehead, 'Submerged and Submerging Voices: Hegemony and the Decline of the Narmada Bachao Andolan in Gujarat, 1998-2001', in *Critical Asian Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007), pp. 399-42.].

⁸ Frances Fox Piven, *Challenging Authority: How Ordinary People Change America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), p. 104.

⁹ In Nepal, for instance, Austin Lord demonstrates how rural Nepalis seek to profit from the implementation of dams through labour employment and the purchase of project-related investment

understand why there is also complicity with the wider project of dam building, and that this complicity can exist among those that view such projects unfavourably.

More specifically, the text examines the comments of Indian citizens who chose not to protest against a series of dams that were set for implementation along the highest tributary of the River Ganga (also known as the Ganges) in the country's northwest mountain region of Garhwal, Uttarakhand. I draw out these voices to add nuance to dam building debates, and to show that the legacy of past resource conflicts can have unexpected results that include public skepticism for the motivations of anti-dam activists. To make this point while drawing from specific examples, I explore the reception of dam opposition platforms that were associated with two men, Sunderlal Bahuguna and Dr. G.D. Agarwal (now known as Swami Gyanswaroop Sansand), who opposed the construction of distinct dams on a tributary of the Ganga known as the Bhagirathi. This content, and the critiques of their activism, is presented to provoke contemplation and to build a more robust presentation of the competing discourses circulated by citizens and social movement actors.¹⁰ I round out this conversation with commentary on the role of Gandhian style platforms in contemporary movements, and the fragility of alliances made between high-profile activists and mountain residents.

While focusing on specific discourses that deserve attention, this article looks at the charge made by several of my interlocutors that lead activists fighting against the dams were motivated by the self-interested pursuit of notoriety. These leaders were, to state it more directly, accused of 'seeking fame' and of trying to promote their own 'name and fame'. Through the exploration of these critiques— which emerged over the course of an ethnographic research project that spanned the years of 2008–2009 with follow up visits in

shares. See: Austin Lord, 'Citizens of a Hydropower Nation: Territory and Agency at the Frontiers of Hydropower Development in Nepal, in *Economic Anthropology*, Vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 145-160.

¹⁰ The exploration of social movement discord is inspired by the insightful work of Wendy Wolford [*This Land is Ours Now: Social Mobilization and the Meanings of Land in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)].

2012 and 2014—the article endeavors to explain a sociological phenomenon of significant importance: the issue of why people *choose not to join opposition movements* to contest dam building in contemporary India. The exploration of why some people refrain from protesting certain dam projects amplifies our understandings of the cultural politics of hydroelectric development that citizens, activists, and social movements produce. This effort also builds upon the insights of scholars who look at leadership struggles in India’s everyday democratic politics.¹¹ Such scholars argue that it is important to examine, ‘the actions, ideas, and values of people who wield power and (who) influence the various types of political spheres that are to be found in the subcontinent’, but who have perhaps not typically been given adequate consideration as political actors.¹²

Resource Conflict Through the Prism of Cultural Politics

Cultural politics is a pertinent framework for the following discussion because it includes the processes enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying, different cultural meanings and practices come into conflict with one another.¹³ In a cultural politics formulation, ‘culture’ is a ‘site of contestation’ that includes social inequities and relations of power as well as ideas of ‘identity, community, and territory’.¹⁴ When applied to the study of resource conflicts, a cultural politics lens involves looking at contending discourses, resource values, and visions of an improved social and ecological world. In looking at the realms of action and critique associated with cultural politics, existing scholarship suggests that civil

¹¹ Arild Engelsen Ruud and Pamela Price, ‘Introduction’, in Arild Engelsen Ruud and Pamela Price (eds), *Power and Influence in India: Bosses, Lords, and Captains* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2010), pp. xix-xxxiv.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. xxi

¹³ Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, ‘Introduction: The Cultural and the Political in Latin American Social Movements’, in Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar (eds), *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998.), pp. 7.

¹⁴ Donald S. Moore, ‘The Crucible of Cultural Politics: Reworking “Development” in Zimbabwe’s Eastern Highlands’, in *American Ethnologist* Vol. 26, no. 3, p. 656.

society actors and social movement participants are key producers of cultural politics because they often attempt to upset a dominant socio-cultural order with meanings and practices that are marginal, oppositional, residual, emergent, and alternative. As Charles Kurzman writes ‘... social movements may be a particularly conducive site to privilege meaning-making, because their activities foreground resistance to the dominant norms and institutions of society’.¹⁵

Collective acts of resistance, however, do not mean that all social movements are inherently democratic or 'emancipatory' in their internal processes. The tensions that persist among social movements can be significant, and the study of these tensions can further illuminate the cultural politics of the resource conflicts in play. Recognizing the multiple repertoires of resistance in which social movements are engaged, Donna L. Chollett asks us to consider cultural politics as a ‘dialectical process’ wherein cultural meanings and activities reshape taken for granted understandings within a context of unequal access to power (297). Her work includes the inequalities that operate within social movements, which is a stance that ultimately challenges assumptions about the ‘virtuousness’ of social movements.¹⁶

Also operating within the cultural politics of social movements is the issue of how they, and the issues around which they organise, are presented. This can be especially true when social movements fight to defend water, land, and forests from degradation and extraction due to a range of cultural, religious, and ecological reasons. It is for this reason that Amita Baviskar warns: 'The politics of naming movements as “environmental” or otherwise is not settled quite so easily... the representation of social movements as "environmentalist" emerges from a discursive encounter between different groups within the

¹⁵ Charles Kurzman, 'Meaning Making in Social Movements', in *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol. 81, no. 1 (2008), pp. 6.

¹⁶ Donna L. Chollett, “'Like an Ox Yoke': Challenging the Intrinsic Virtuousness of a Grassroots Social Movement”, in *Critique of Anthropology* Vol. 31, no. 4 (2011), pp. 293-311.

movement and their supporters. The multiple contending meanings that different groups bring to the terrain of struggle are negotiated and new understandings created in an ongoing process of dialogue between unequally situated actors'.¹⁷ These observations foreshadow the discussion of movement politics and power struggles that come to the fore when discussing the legacies of two activist men.

Before moving on to the main text, it bears noting that in the backdrop of the cultural politics to be explored are the discursive constructions and circulations of value-laden notions of 'development'.¹⁸ This requires additional attention to the cultural politics of development; such an approach involves examining the 'micro-politics' through which 'global development discourses are refracted, reworked, and sometimes subverted in particular locales'.¹⁹ In India, dams are part and parcel of discursively potent development agenda that has advanced since the middle of the twentieth century. Although often unpopular for the communities living in project affected zones, dams have been pursued as a development strategy by colonial and post-colonial Indian governments as well as by international organisations such as the World Bank. The early dam building arguments that came out of the office of the first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, famously framed hydroelectric development as nearly synonymous with the nation's 'progress'. Such narratives were set amid budding desires to escape the category of 'underdevelopment' and enter into the category of 'developing' or 'developed'.²⁰ As Akhil Gupta writes in his book, *Postmodern*

¹⁷ Amita Baviskar, 'Red in Tooth and Claw? Looking for Class in Struggles over Nature', in Raka Ray and Mary Fainsod Katzenstein (eds), *Social Movements in India: Poverty, Power, and Politics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005), pp. 164-165.

¹⁸ Stacy Leigh Pigg offers a seminal discussion of subjective notions of development—and the desire for being 'developed'—in her article, 'Inventing Social Categories through Place: Social Representations and Development in Nepal' [in *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 34, no. 3 (1992), pp. 491-513.].

¹⁹ Moore, 'The Crucible of Cultural Politics', p. 655.

²⁰ David Ludden, 'India's Development Regime', in Nicholas B Dirks (ed), *Colonialism and Culture*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) p. 247; See also: Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995).

Developments, it was particularly the repeated reminder that India was not-yet developed that had an effect on how Indians saw themselves. He argues: '...to be a national subject in an 'underdevelopment country'—for example, to be a citizen of India—is to occupy an overdetermined subject position interpellated by discourses of the nation *and* [original emphasis] the discourses of development to which that nation is subjected.'²¹ To state it otherwise, the discourses used to promote and validate dams in India operate as powerful factors shaping the cultural politics of hydroelectric dam building.

Movement Tensions and Subtexts of Social Discord

When I first began visiting Garhwal in 2004 to make inquiries about the impact of dam building on the region, the government's emphasis on development was a concern that several interlocutors initially flagged when explaining that 'that there is no use' in opposing hydroelectric projects already decided upon by the state. Over subsequent years, interlocutors gave further commentary that ranged from, 'There is no point in resisting,' to, 'You can't fight the government.' Numerous examples of highly contentious development projects from the past were given as evidence of this; disputed dams on the religiously revered Narmada and Ganga rivers, for instance, had ultimately gone ahead despite decades of social movement protest. This produced skepticism that politicians would have their way regardless of the efforts that citizens might enact to oppose particular projects.

Suggestions that social movement campaigns were (and are) pointless can be a great source of consternation to those that take the time and energy to contest hydroelectric development. This was particularly evident in the effort to oppose three specific dams of 350, 416, and 600 Megawatts that were in various stages of implementation or construction from 2006–2010 in the mountains of Uttarakhand State. These dams—Bhaironghati Phase I & II,

²¹ Akhil Gupta, *Postcolonial Developments: Agriculture in the Making of Modern India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 41.

Loharinag Pala, and Pala Maneri—were meant to direct water out of the Bhagirathi, a main tributary of the River Ganga that flows from a protected glacial source at Gaumukh.²²

Activists involved in a series of occasionally overlapping social movement campaigns (some of which were organised by mountain residents, others of which were organised by plains-based residents visiting the mountains for short visits) were motivated *in part* by the ecological impacts that these medium sized diversion dams threatened to cause due to the drilling and blasting of the tunnels needed to create an underground slope severe enough to generate electricity.²³²⁴ Many of the activists who joined in the ebb and flow of dam opposition campaigns also cited their concerns about the cultural and religious implications of building dams on the last unobstructed and freely flowing stretch of the Ganga—an entity revered by Hindus as a source of spiritual purification and a symbol of Hindu faith. Since the construction of these projects entailed extensive dynamite blasting and drilling in order to build the tunnels designed to redirect water out of the river's main flow, river devotees worried that the very essence and divine power (*shakti*) of the Goddess Ganga would be diminished because only freely-flowing (*aviral*) water is considered holy and pure (*nirmal*).

The relative proximity of these dams to the Ganga's glacial source and to a downstream temple town and pilgrimage destination at Gangotri was further invoked to frame the opposition as an appeal to protect the cultural and religious sentiments of self-identified Hindus. A spot near the Gangotri temple is where the Goddess Ganga (who embodies the River Ganga and imbues it with her divine grace) is believed to have fallen from heaven. These histories solidify the temple as a major pilgrimage destination for devotees seeking to gain the Ganga's divine blessings.

²² When mentioning this tributary, residents call it the 'Ganga' rather than the 'Bhagirathi'.

²³ Once electricity is produced and put into the power grid, the water is released back into the riverbed (as opposed to it being used for irrigation or to augment the water supply).

²⁴ Displacement was not a primary concern as the land and residence loss of diversion dams is nominal compared to the impact of reservoir dams.

Because the dams were set for implementation just a few dozen kilometres downstream from Gangotri, opponents asserted that the government-approved projects were an insult to the Goddess embodied by the waters, and a move that showed insensitivity to the reverence that Hindus hold for the river. A main reason for this assertion was that, once completed, the tunnels attached to the diversion dams would force the Ganga out of its riverbed for long stretches and away from the loving gaze and touch of devotees.²⁵ At a regional level, this would hamper the ability of Hindus to access the culturally and religiously important waters needed to sanctify ritual acts. At a national level, some worried that the damming of the last freely-flowing stretches of the Ganga would serve as a final act of disrespect to a river that is extensively manipulated and heavily polluted.

In response to range of cultural, religious, and ecological concerns evoked by the three dam projects, some of the residents of Garhwal banded together to raise awareness. Many others—many millions of others—did not. This caused a point of confusion, and reflection. Why wasn't there a mass movement to stop the final three dams on the last freely flowing section of what is arguably India's most iconic river? When I tried to pose this question to dam opponents who gathered for a rally that was not well attended (see Figure 1 below), one interlocutor replied sharply, 'Because they are hypocrites.' When asked for clarification, she explained her opinion that any self-labeled Hindu who does not rise to defend the Ganga against desecration is hypocritical; the mandates of their faith should compel them to action. Another interlocutor explained away the lack of civil society action to stop dams on the Ganga by saying that Indian citizens have become 'too passive' and 'too

²⁵ The intense desire of devotees to be by the Ganga's side is made especially public when millions gather in one of the world's best organized mass events during the auspicious period known as *kumbh mela* [See, for instance: Kama Maclean, *Pilgrimage and Power: The Kumbh Mela in Allahabad 1765-1954* (Madison: Oxford University Press, 2008).].

materialistic' to take the action needed to protect the river. Others reflected that Indians have become 'too secular', and thus less inclined to stand up for the sacred river's defense.

**Figure 1: A 'Save the Ganga' Rally in Rishikesh, India
Photo by Author, February 2009**

Over the course of interviews starting in 2008, but which grew in number as the dam opposition movements gained visibility in 2009 and 2010, residents of the region where these dams were set for construction claimed that it was many of the activists who were, in fact, 'hypocritical'. Many of these interlocutors minced no words in saying that they looked upon the social movement campaigners with suspicion. In the crosshairs of such critiques were the lead activists, the ones in the limelight. These leaders were described by numerous interlocutors as motivated by a pursuit of their own brand recognition and notoriety.²⁶

'Fame-Seeking Activists' and Leadership Critiques

Within the movements, it became evident over time that as people went about the work of identifying the most effective way to 'frame' the issues and opposition campaigns,²⁷ they were also trying to ascertain who was in the fight to defend the Ganga for the 'right' (or unselfish) reasons and who, by contrast, was involved for the purpose of ego gratification and perhaps personal gain. The research uncovered a persistent concern that some people were involved in the effort to stop dams on the Ganga in order to promote their own 'name and fame'. The wording meant to indicate that certain people desired to increase their own notoriety and prestige by serving as visible movement leaders. This accusation, often posed

²⁶ The less prominent citizens who joined the rallies and marches were forgiven by such critics for being followers compelled by their love (*prem*) for the River Ganga and its Goddess.

²⁷ Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow, 'Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment', in *Annual Review of Sociology* 26 (2000), pp. 611-639.

in English even among Hindi speakers, carried significant weight. It was a very serious charge, as was the assertion that certain people took part in the campaigns to ‘enlarge one’s own name’ (*apna naam badaane ke liyee*). Over time, the name and fame trope became an important point of investigation not just because of the internal divisions it revealed, but also because of the resource politics that it had the potential to illuminate.

A chance exchange was particularly revealing of the distrust that some people expressed. It took place when I was making a routine visit to two ardent Ganga devotees who run a medical clinic in Uttarkashi, a district capital located just a few dozen miles downstream from the dam construction sites. On a sunny day in August of 2009, I found the couple at their medical shop in Uttarkashi’s main market. As I entered and sat down next to a man wearing simple orange robes, I discovered that the pair were in the middle of an animated exchange with the Hindu ascetic. The husband, a doctor, was complaining to the man in robes about a certain movement leader who was trying to get him involved in the dam opposition. He lamented, ‘They are playing a political game. Whoever gets in the middle will get swallowed.’ Elaborating on his concerns, the doctor suggested that such people, if they truly want to help the Ganga, should just focus on singing God’s praises and doing their meditation. ‘Yeah’, said his wife, who had already added several points of supporting commentary during this exchange, ‘just worship God.’ Whereas the doctor cautioned against the politics behind the dam opposition, her comments were meant to remind us that it is the primary duty of Hindus to treat the Ganga with devotion. If politics have soured the river’s treatment, then the argument was to double one’s personal efforts to selflessly serve the divine entity within those waters while remaining above the political fray. These comments were especially interesting because this couple had previously expressed dismay at the river’s treatment and the scope of the development activities that had, in their eyes, lead the river to

ruin.²⁸ They wanted to see the river looking healthy and running free, and they worried about the region's future prospects if the Ganga was further impaired.

In his response to the couple's statements, I expected that the renunciant would object and say that it was precisely because of the river's importance to Hindus that they have a religious duty to protect the Ganga from dams, regardless of the wider politics. Instead, he offered slowly spoken commentary that supported the criticisms of my two interlocutors. 'The general public', he began, 'is of the opinion that these [people and] organizations working in the name of Ganga... they think that they just want money, (and) that is why they protest.' He then immediately drew upon a past movement legacy, the fight against a downstream project known as the Tehri dam. The leader of that movement—Sunderlal Bahuguna—was named as someone whose primary aim was notoriety and financial gain. The renunciant contended that this man, a person that I will introduce later while defending his track record, was the first to protest against the Tehri dam and that he was also the first man to take rewards from the government on the condition that he would stop protesting. 'When his money would run out', claimed the renunciant, 'he would go back and sit down on strike. When he got money again, he would keep quiet. So that is how it goes. There are many such examples.' The husband and wife agreed, lamenting that such people could not be trusted. Nodding as he stood to purchase his medicine, the renunciant emphasised that the problem is that movement leaders 'do not have the support of the general public.'

These comments were not isolated to this one exchange. During the main period of fieldwork from 2008–2009, I encountered numerous conversations that echoed the sentiments expressed. Some of my interlocutors even encouraged me to disregard the

²⁸ The doctor even said, in a different one-on-one exchange, that the Ganga's waters were lamentably 'dead' because they were no longer flowing freely most of the year due to already existing projects. He complained that these projects were poorly implemented and that, "The politicians ate all the money" (and were/are corrupt).

movement leaders I was speaking with and ethnographically shadowing, as they were ‘only politicians’ using the call to save the Ganga to advance personal agendas. But as one interlocutor said with a disheartened laugh, at least with politicians you know they are corrupt; the high-profile activists, by contrast, hide behind a discourse of selflessness that obscures their ‘real’ motivations (which he saw as the pursuit of fame and notoriety). In the view of these critics, the issue of dam building on a culturally and religiously revered river was more akin to the backdrop of a drama than it was the main point around which the drama revolved. The name-calling and instances of critique were often based on memories of misrepresentations, exclusions, and power ‘abuses’ by notable movement leaders whose past actions continue to impact upon present expressions of skepticism and distrust.

The role of the past in the present speaks to concerns of memory and how it operates in movement processes. The literature on social movements evidences a growing engagement with memory and what some call ‘memory movements’, which are efforts to revive collective memory and increase attention to past incidents (and the actions of key individuals) in order to challenge the authority of prevailing understandings.²⁹ Also important are the insidious ways that memories of campaigns past can destabilise, as well as strengthen, contemporary efforts.³⁰ Where they are most capable of destabilization is when they are charged with anger over recollections of past injustices done, not just at the hands of policymakers, but by the very movement leaders in whom trust was given.

It is for the above reasons that the critique of Sunderlal Bahuguna's work and legacy merits discussion. Sunderlal (as he is commonly called) is the man that the earlier quoted

²⁹ Raj Andrew Ghoshal, 'Transforming Collective Memory: Mnemonic Opportunity Structures and the Outcomes of Racial Violence in Memory Movements', in *Theory and Society*, Vol. 42, no. 4 (2013), pp. 339-350.

³⁰ This is not to say that memories of prior movement conflicts are accurate, static, or unproblematic. Memory, particularly as it is passed on to others, is continually constructed and reconstructed [Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', in *Representations* 26 (1989), pp. 7-24.].

renunciant criticised when speaking against distrustful movement leaders. I note at the outset that the renunciant's claims were likely unfounded. Sunderlal has an impressive track record as a social reformer and activist. He dedicated himself to improving the lives of the poor and marginalised and is a model of self-sacrifice for many activists and scholars.³¹ The praise that exists for Sunderlal nationally and internationally, in fact, is likely to far exceed the criticisms about his activism. Yet, those criticisms do persist. Scholars such as Haripriya Rangan caution, for instance, that there is a good deal of myth making that goes into the national and international presentations of 'environmental' movements in the Himalayas, as well as the role of high-profile activists such as Sunderlal.³² Rangan adds that the narratives of Sunderlal's service and sacrifice have 'enhanced his public image as a charismatic saviour of the Himalayas, and the authentic voice of its common folk'.³³ Antje Linkenbach similarly asks for us to consider the legacies of post-movement politics in her portrayal of the dissatisfactions that mountain villagers express about leaders like Sunderlal.³⁴ She quotes villagers who lament that Sunderlal did not evenly share the recognition and monetary gains of the awards that he received for the activism in which many Garhwalis participated.³⁵

In the interest of refraining from the promulgation of myths, and the idealisation of movement leaders, it is only fair that I explore in some depth the charges laid against Sunderlal Bahuguna for his role in past dam oppositions. This content is not meant to tarnish his reputation but to point out the long-term implications of the kinds of activism with which he is associated. I stress here that there is relevance beyond the current case at hand. Alpa

³¹ George Alfred James, *Ecology is Permanent Economy: The Activism and Environmental Philosophy of Sunderlal Bahuguna* (Albany: State University of New York, 2013).

³² Haripriya Rangan, *Of Myths and Movements: Rewriting Chipko into Himalayan History* (New York: Verso, 2000).

³³ *Ibid.*, p.31.

³⁴ Antje Linkenbach, *Forest Futures: Global Representations and Ground Realities in the Himalayas* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007).

³⁵ Antje Linkenbach argues that the hostility for Sunderlal's campaign efforts were heightened when he received some of India's highest awards for his activism (Linkenbach, *Forest Futures*, pp. 84-85).

Shah, in her book on indigenous livelihoods and conservation politics in Jharkhand, India, explores similar tensions to speak to issues of voice and representation.³⁶ In this work, she asks: ‘Are the organised battles [over which activists fight] equally valuable for all those on whose behalf they are allegedly fought?’³⁷ A part of this is the issue of inclusion amongst and between indigenous activists. Through her ethnography, she shows that the opinions, desires, and concerns of the poorest rural indigenous actors, ‘contradicted and subverted those of the well-meaning urban-based middle-class activists, as well as those of the rural elites aspiring to rise up the class hierarchy.’³⁸ She points to these challenges while drawing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak³⁹ to demonstrate the possibility that activist intellectuals are unknowingly complicit in the task of further marginalizing the people for whom they claim to speak.⁴⁰ It is in the wider spirit of exploring these questions that I study Sunderlal’s efforts.

Sunderlal Bahuguna's Legacy: Memories of the Tehri Dam Movement

It was Sunderlal's efforts to stop the construction of Tehri dam on the Ganga’s Bhagirathi tributary in the 1980's and 1990's that animated the critique provided earlier by the couple and the renunciant. Recall that the renunciant lamented the following: ‘He was the first to protest and he was the first man to take rewards from the government. When his money would run out, he would go back and sit down on strike.’ Here, the renunciant is speaking to the years of stop-and-start protests in which Bahuguna was the lead campaigner. His main

³⁶ Alpa Shah, *In the Shadows of the State: Indigenous Activism, Environmentalism, and Insurgency in Jharkhand, India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 25.

³⁸ *ibid.* p., 11.

³⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelso and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 271-313.

⁴⁰ Shah, *In the Shadows of the State*, pp. 25.

tactic of protest was the fast-unto-death. In fact, claims Mukul Sharma,⁴¹ Sunderlal Bahuguna's fasts in 1992, 1995, 1997, and 2001 were the main rallying points for the opposition to the Tehri dam.⁴² At issue were a suite of concerns that the large dam would drown out a historic town, submerge over 100 villages, displace some 100,000 residents, and harm the Goddess Ganga who needs free-flowing water to remain healthy and ritually pure.

While Bahuguna had the wellbeing of the residents of the to-be-submerged Tehri township at heart,⁴³ the concern for the Goddess Ganga's health and purity seemed an especially important point of motivation. Although the issue of equitable development was on his mind, in other words, he also worried about protecting the Ganga and its wider Himalayan landscape for reasons of cultural and religious continuity. In an interview with David Haberman, Sunderlal characterized the battle over the Tehri dam as a fight between 'good and evil' (wherein 'evil' is the unchecked destructive force of modernisation).⁴⁴ His opposition efforts were hence framed as an upstanding moral response to the dangers that the dam symbolised. The use of the fast-unto-death was helpful in conveying this perspective. As Mukul Sharma explains, Bahuguna viewed the fasts as a righteous (*satvik*) protest tactic that was capable of garnering public and media attention.⁴⁵ The method was developed by ascetics of generations past who sought knowledge of the inner self (*aatma gyan*) through various types of penance and sacrifice (*tapasya*). As a protest tactic, it was picked up and

⁴¹ Mukul Sharma, 'Passages from Nature to Nationalism: Sunderlal Bahuguna and Tehri Dam Opposition in Garhwal', in *Political and Economic Weekly*, 12 February, Vol. XLIV, no. 8 (2009), pp. 35-43.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴³ James, *Ecology is Permanent Economy*, pp. 171-204.

⁴⁴ David L Haberman, *River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), p. 72.

⁴⁵ As Amita Bhaviskar, Emma Mawdsley and Mukul Sharma note, the religiously charged discourse that Sunderlal used overlapped with the language and politics of conservative Hindu organisations such as the Vishva Hindu Parishad. This discourse was polarising, and it was subject to considerable critique. [See: Bhaviskar, 'Red in Tooth and Claw', p. 166; Emma Mawdsley, 'The Abuse of Religion and Ecology: The Vishva Hindu Parishad and the Tehri Dam', in *Worldviews: Environment, Culture, Religion*, Vol. 8, no. 2 (2005), pp. 1-24; Mukul Sharma, *Green and Saffron: Hindu Nationalism and Indian Environmental Politics* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2010), p. 37-40.]

popularised by Mohandas Gandhi. When Gandhi fasted for a particular cause, such as to overturn colonial policies or to stop communal violence, people were forced to revise their positions as he neared death after weeks without nourishment. In building upon the model set by Mohandas Gandhi, Sunderlal made appeals against the unchecked development of the Himalaya that called for small-scale and 'alternative' development models.⁴⁶

While Gandhi's fasting tactics have influenced generations of social movements across the political spectrum, those tactics are not without critique.⁴⁷ The founder of an NGO promoting sustainable development and economic prosperity in the region is one such critic. As he commented during our interview in July of 2008, Sunderlal's past actions in opposition to the by-then completed Tehri dam may have 'created damage' because his fasts appeared to *some* to be motivated by a desire to be seen and known more than they were efforts taken in a selfless pursuit of environmental sustainability and religious duty. What is more, this critic charged that Sunderlal's fasts, and the demands that he put forth while enduring those fasts, imposed a distinct vision of small-scale, 'Gandhian-type' development upon the Garhwal Himalaya. Such critics charge that his calls for forest preservation over the expansion of industrial activity did not always match what villagers envisioned for the future of the region in which they lived. In dictating to others what was at stake in the dam construction, the NGO interlocutor claimed that Sunderlal was unable to listen to the multiple stakeholders around him that had 'varying visions' of mountain development, and nuanced arguments for and against the Tehri dam.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Other sources of inspiration for Sunderlal include Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan.

⁴⁷ For critiques of how activists such as Anna Hazare have used the fasting tactic in the early twenty-first century, see: Mitu Sengupta, 'Anna Hazare and the Idea of Gandhi', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 71, no. 3 (2012), pp. 593-601; Aradhana Sharma, 'Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles: The "India Against Corruption" Movement, its Critics, and the Re-Making of "Gandhi"', in *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, Vol. 37, no. 3 (2014), pp. 365-380.

⁴⁸ Sharma, *Green and Saffron*, p. 118. These tensions show how movement recollections are fluid rather than static; as such, they are open to debate, to interpretation, and to reconfiguration.

Beyond the discursive critiques of Sunderlal's fasts, the packaging of his opposition tactics also points to the challenge of channeling Mohandas Gandhi for contemporary protests in India. As Aradhana Sharma and others comment,⁴⁹ Gandhi had a particular moral authority to resist British colonial rule (and to promote self dependence and passive resistance, or *swadeshi* and *satyagraha*) via his one-man platforms. Those who apply Gandhi's methods to contemporary activist tactics oftentimes lack that same authority, and many of them refashion his platform while overlooking the ambivalences and controversies that marked Gandhi's protest strategies, as well as other parts of his life. Due to this selective refashioning, writes A. Sharma, the critics of Gandhi-inspired campaigns are more easily able to dismiss activists that have, 'discursively produced Gandhi as an immutable relic with an ossified and... worn-out ideology'.⁵⁰ They are also able to claim that the contemporary movements are 'undemocratic'—a charge that will be laid out with more explanation in the second profile of activism featured in the following section.

What is important to note here is that the memories of Sunderlal's actions, real or imagined, are influential for the discourses and reactions that people produce. In particular, they serve as evidence for the past subtexts of social discord that shape the cultural politics of protest movements against dams on the upper reaches of the Ganga's flow. This discord, I argue, continued when three new dams, mentioned earlier, were in the beginning stages of implementation in locations above the completed Tehri dam. When opposition to those three dams arose in the early twenty-first century, it was not Sunderlal Bahuguna but Dr. G.D. Agarwal that took a prominent public role.⁵¹ Whereas Bahuguna's legacy may have

⁴⁹ Sharma, 'Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles', pp. 365-380. See also: William Mazzarella, 'Branding the Mahatma: The Untimely Provocation of Gandhian Publicity', in *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 25, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1-39.

⁵⁰ Sharma, 'Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles', p. 366.

⁵¹ Sunderlal was well into his eighties when the momentum to build those three high altitude dams picked up. He was not a visible force of opposition to them for various possible reasons, and one might speculate that age and the sorrow of seeing the Tehri dam completed were influential factors.

predisposed some people to distrust Dr. Agarwal, it was the particularities of Dr. Agarwal's campaigns that added to their criticisms. His tactics merit explanation as they may eventually feed into new repertoires of critique and distrust that impact movement processes.

Dr. G. D. Agarwal and the Politics of the Fast-Unto-Death

A former professor at the prestigious I.I.T. Kanpur, G.D. Agarwal held the name recognition and social status that was able to capture the attention of the media and the public when he chose to oppose the Bhaironghati, Loharinag Pala, and Pala Maneri dams. Like Sunderlal, Dr. Agarwal blended Gandhi-inspired protest strategies with discourses in which he positioned himself as a defender of Hindu 'culture' and 'faith'. He did this while capitalizing on his authority as a technical expert whose religious convictions outweighed the scientific influence of his professional training. In his statements, for instance, Dr. Agarwal argued that the damming of the last free-flowing stretches of the Ganga threatened the stability of Hindu cultural practices. This, he worried, threatened the very fabric of Hinduism. Conflating the wellbeing of Hinduism with the wellbeing of the nation, he argued that the effort to save the Ganga's Himalayan flow was effectively an effort to 'save India'.⁵² Dr. Agarwal's comments help to further illuminate the cultural and religious drivers of the conflict.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Agarwal's main opposition tactic was the use of several fast-unto-death campaigns, which ranged from 15 to 38 days. He began his first fast in the Garhwali district capital of Uttarkashi in 2008, although he later moved this protest to New Delhi. Additional fasts were launched from the Indian plains in 2009 and 2010 and each received media and government attention. The third fast in 2010 ended with much fanfare

⁵² G.D. Agarwal, 'A Critique of Loharinag-Pala, Pala-Maneri and Other Hydroelectric Projects on River Bhagirathi', in *Threat to Holy Ganges from Hydro-Electric Projects between Gangotri-Uttarkashi* (New Delhi: Bhagirathi Bachao Sankalp, 2008), pp. 5-20.

after Indian government officials promised to Dr. Agarwal that they would cancel the three contested dams. They also conceded to a demand that the government create an Ecologically Sensitive Zone (Eco-Zone) in the region where the three contested dams were being built. Ultimately, the Eco-Zone was officially declared, via a governmental 'notification', in December of 2012. The notification specifies that a 100-kilometre stretch of the River Bhagirathi flowing from the glacial source at Gaumukh will be protected under a series of guidelines that limit development to mitigate the 'anthropogenic pressure on ecosystems (and) the environment'.⁵³ The mandates of the Eco-Zone required initial public consultation 'with local people (and) particularly women' but controversy persists over the extent to which this has taken place.⁵⁴ As a result, several aspects of the Eco-Zone went under review for potential 'tweaks' demanded by impacted residents, as well as by state government officials, who view the conservation zone as a deterrent to economic opportunity and a burdensome restriction on the state's development.⁵⁵⁵⁶

Even before the controversies over the Eco-Zone implementation had come to the fore, many interlocutors living in Garhwal critiqued Dr. Agarwal's fasts-unto-death tactic, which placed him front-and-centre in the public eye as the main dam objector. Instead of unwavering praise, what often arose in the Garhwal-based conversations I observed was a concern that most of Dr. Agarwal's fasts were conducted in the Indian plains rather than in

⁵³ Government of India, *S.O.2930(E), [18/12/2012] - River Bhagirathi from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi as Eco-sensitive Zone, Notification* (New Delhi: Ministry of Environment and Forests, 2012), <http://www.moef.nic.in/assets/2930.pdf>.

⁵⁴ Jayshree Nandi, 'Is Uttarakhand Eco Plan for Bhagirathi a Sham? Water Ministry Smells a Rat', *Economic Times*, 10 Jan 2017, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/environment/pollution/is-uttarakhand-eco-plan-for-bhagirathi-a-sham-water-ministry-smells-a-rat/articleshow/56432646.cms>, accessed 15 January 2017.

⁵⁵ Mayank Aggarwal, 'Govt Plans to Tweak Eco-Sensitive Zone Rules on Upper Ganga Stretch', *Live Mint*, 10 March 2017, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/CL1rsClnVSts6W2NRF1gKI/Govt-plans-to-tweak-rules-for-Bhagirathi-zone-along-Ganga.html>, accessed 20 March 2017.

⁵⁶ Jaago Re, 'In the Valley Where Ganga Flows Clean and Free, "Brakes" on Development', *Hindustan Times*, 8 February 2017, <http://www.hindustantimes.com/dehradun/in-the-valley-where-ganga-flows-clean-and-free-brakes-on-development/story-iPOZoEjy39v24ItTp3M3eK.html>, accessed 1 March 2017.

the Himalaya where the dams were being built. For some of the skeptics living in the mountains, this belied Dr. Agarwal's status as an 'outsider' who had no right to meddle in the management of the river's flow in Garhwal. Some pointed to the years he spent as a professor in Kanpur to say that, if he was really worried about the Ganga, he should have worked to save the river from the high levels of pollution visibly choking the river in that industrial city. Such interlocutors found it suspect that he would choose to campaign against the management of a Himalayan stretch of the river with which he had little embodied experience relative to that of long-term residents.

The accusation that Dr. Agarwal was an outsider enabled people to speculate that he was more concerned with enhancing his own name recognition than with helping mountain people fight unchecked development processes. If his motivations were otherwise, several of my interlocutors contended, then he would have worked more to capacitate the mountain residents concerned about the dams. This is why an interlocutor with experience working on social issues in the Garhwal mountains later claimed the great weakness of Dr. Agarwal's 'brand of movement' was that it was not connected to the 'local movements'. As additional commenters pointed out, the disconnection between his one-man platform and the desires and struggles of people who live in the Himalayas meant that his brand of activism was essentially 'undemocratic'. Here again, we see the overtones of the wider critique for protest platforms that draw from the model that Mohandas Gandhi laid out. These critiques are particularly strong when they are in response to the fast-unto-death tactic that people such as Dr. Agarwal employ. In a different case that the aforementioned Aradhana Sharma lays out, one observer of a hunger strike (performed by Anna Hazare) likened it to a 'suicide bombing in slow motion' and a form of 'violent coercion [that] can never nourish democracy'.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Sharma, 'Epic Fasts and Shallow Spectacles', p. 369.

While these critiques might seem trivial or he-said-she-said in nature, they can influence public opinion in a way that has long-term implications. In a telling turn of events, a number of pro-dam movements arose from 2010 onwards in response to Dr. Agarwal's campaigns. Some of their actions demonstrated the highly emotional character of the conflict. For instance, when the former professor tried to expand his campaign in 2012 to stop additional dams planned for construction on the Alaknanda River, which also feeds into the Ganga's Himalayan flow, he was met by angry protestors who defended their right to 'development' (*vikaas*). At the time, Dr. Agarwal had taken *sanyasin* vows and could now claim the status of a Hindu Swami. Despite his elevated status, when he attempted to visit the dam building area for an alleged protest (*dharna*), his caravan was attacked by a mob of protestors who criticised him for inciting anti-development, 'anti-Uttarakhand', and 'anti-India' sentiments. The dam activists reportedly hurled shoes at his vehicle and chased him down the mountain for nearly 20 miles.⁵⁸ In the same news report that documented the shoe throwing, Mr. Rajendra Singh—often referred to as India's 'waterman' for his prominent work on rainwater harvesting in Rajasthan—claimed that the accosters were backed by the dam construction company and by political interests.⁵⁹ While there might be truth to that, the point of leverage was nonetheless the distrust and skepticism of outsiders who meddle in the region's development trajectory, leaving little room for the inclusion of mountain residents. Also at issue was the concern for mountain-based employment. As Mantri Prasad Naithani of the Congress Party stated, 'The Ganga and its tributaries are sacred for all and their sanctity would remain even after making the dams.' He added: 'The power projects will lead to numerous avenues of direct and indirect employment for the poor hill masses'.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ The throwing of shoes is a sign of disrespect and it is highly symbolic of the animosity felt.

⁵⁹ C.K. Chandramohan, 'Plea to scrap Ganga River Basin Authority,' *The Hindu*, 25 June (2012), Accessed on 12 July 2012. Available at:

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article3567161.ece>

⁶⁰ C. K. Chandramohan, "Pro-dam Activists Leave for Delhi Dharna," *The Hindu*, July 10, 2012, ,

Around the same period in 2012, protest movements reemerged in the region where the three dams were canceled—but this time they were predominantly in favor of restarting work on the canceled dams. The bulk of those publicly calling for the reopening of the projects were the labourers, contractors, and shop owners that previously clashed with the dam opposition movements. Employment concerns were again high on the list of the grievances made by dam proponents since a subset of the population hoped to work on the dam constructions as wage earners. On return visits to Uttarkashi in 2012 and 2014, I even observed that some of the people who once campaigned against the dams had changed their opinion and were now dam proponents. Some of these interlocutors said they felt cheated by how their concerns for the Ganga's wellbeing were hijacked for use in a one-man show that resulted in not just dam cancellations but also the creation of an Eco-Zone that would ban a wide gamut of riverside development activities, and about which there was little consultation.

While a number of stalwart dam opponents continued to back Dr. Agarwal and his campaigns, others lamented that such people could not be trusted. One such interlocutor was a woman who I knew to be highly involved in the mountain-based efforts to oppose the dams. When they were finally canceled and Dr. Agarwal was credited with this ‘win’, she felt that her substantial sacrifice of time and energy was overlooked. As a result, she promised to refrain from all future movement activity—even if the dam cancellations were to one day be reversed. These stances serve as a reminder of the ways that contested activist tactics feed into the cultural politics of hydroelectric development in India, as well as why the negative assessment of activists' personal motivations can lead people who express deep affection and concern for the Ganga to abstain, and even withdraw, from social movement campaigns.

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article3622181.ece>, accessed July 12, 2012.

'Name and Fame' and The Cultural Politics of Social Movements Revisited

This text offered an expanded discussion of the varied reactions that citizens demonstrate in response to Himalayan hydropower conflicts. While we should have full sympathy for, and even express outrage at, the ways that hydroelectric projects are being pushed upon 'communities' of people living in the mountains of the Himalaya, we also need to examine the inter- and intra-community tensions that emerge as people make sense of these projects. This includes their appraisals of whether or not these projects can viably be contested, and whether or not those efforts at contestation might be harnessed by a select few for their own personal or political motivations. If and when those appraisals lead people to calculate that it is best to abstain from engaging in protest, then there is also an obligation to examine the ways that this might reflect a more savvy perspective on hydropower conflicts than might otherwise be presumed. Part of this savvy might also be an understanding that the social movements inspired by hydropower conflicts can result in mixed outcomes when the movement participants have divergent motivations and diverse understandings of what is at stake. This points to the hidden subtexts of distrust and skepticism that help explain why Indian citizens do not stand behind high-profile movement leaders more often, as well as why some citizens end up changing their opinions on the value of Himalayan dam building.

Given the concern expressed by those who did not join the dam oppositions, it appears that the inclination to praise the lone upper-caste activist influenced by Gandhian tactics and ideals is one that merits caution. While notable scholarship does show how Mohandas Gandhi's legacy influences contemporary movements in ways that might enable broad-based campaigns,⁶¹ others have indicated that a similar source of inspiration can lead

⁶¹ Rebecca Klenk, *Educating Activists: Development and Gender in the Making of Modern Gandhians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India: A Review of Literature*, 2nd Edition (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2004); Hemant Shah, 'Communication and

to misrepresentation when the focus is put on a single movement leader.⁶² Maintaining an emphasis on the cultural politics operating within movements is, therefore, a way to add nuance to the analyses produced. Such efforts involve looking at ‘the articulation of struggles’ that are ‘simultaneously material and symbolic’.⁶³ Also at issue in these cultural politics is the questionable use of polarizing discourses, and of attempts to elevate past ‘traditions’ that have served to keep some people marginalised while others have fared somewhat better. A move to include more attention to the cultural politics of activism may ultimately invite more debate within the social movements that are influenced by a Gandhian activist model that places a lone campaigner—often a man of mature years and high social standing—front and centre. This is significant as the discursive tensions itemised in this text indicate the potential, and the desire, for more democratic and representative means of civic action in the pursuit of equitable resource management.

To underline the point, the critiques of ‘fame-seeking’ activists are socially important. These critiques underscore subtexts of social discord that are set within the wider cultural politics of dam building, and of development more broadly. That these critiques exist does not, however, mean that they are always accurate or merited. When writing about the internationally known campaigns against dams on the Narmada River, for instance, Amita Baviskar reminds us that movements very often have to rely on people with ‘celebrity’ appeal in order to make the demands of the movement known.⁶⁴ Whether that activist is Medha Patkar or Arundhati Roy (in the case of the movements against dams on the Narmada) or Sunderlal Bahuguna and Dr. G.D. Agarwal (in the case of the movements against dams on the Ganga), these high-profile activists can force significant attention to important issues. At

Marginal Sites: The Chipko Movement and the Dominant Paradigm of Development Communication’, *Asian Journal of Communication* Vol. 18, no. 1 (2008), pp. 32-46.

⁶² Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River*.

⁶³ Moore, ‘The Crucible of Cultural Politics’, p. 656.

⁶⁴ Baviskar, *Red in Tooth and Claw*, p. 168.

times, the 'skewedness in coverage' of these celebrity platforms is something that the movements choose to accept 'as a means of attracting metropolitan supporters to their cause.'⁶⁵ This is part of a phenomena that Dan Brockington has explored in various conservation-based conflicts that capitalise on the fame and popular appeal of a well-known celebrity who may or may not have a full grasp of the competing claims and interests of the various stakeholders involved in the conflict.⁶⁶ An underlying driver of this phenomena, of course, is the media demand for flashy news bites. As Baviskar cautions, the discourses that appeal to the media, and to the masses that consume it, often favour 'glamour more than substance'.⁶⁷ This can mean that certain leaders are caught in the bind of having the ability to make an impact on a movement's visibility while also risking accusations of selfish motivation and fame-seeking pursuits. These observations, nonetheless, leave room to appreciate the discursive and ideological hybridity that movements produce, as well as 'the ways in which the tensions and contradictions between different, unequal groups are negotiated.'⁶⁸ In the course of such investigations, we can uncover the cultural politics of resource conflict along with the cultural politics produced by social movement processes.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Dan Brockington, *Celebrity Advocacy and International Development* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶⁷ Baviskar, *Red in Tooth and Claw*, p. 174.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*