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## Book Review

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Georgina Drew, *River Dialogues: Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), xii + 257 pp., \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-8165-3510-1.

This is a book of many voices. We hear a multitude of positions expressed, ranging from government officials proudly presenting hydro-electric projects, to the everyday practice and religious connections voiced by local women, all against a backdrop of the murmur of the Ganga River herself. Both the defenders of the dams and the defenders of the sacred river turn out to have complex voices, and even the Ganges has a voice of many registers: starting as an icy trickle high in the western Himalayas, rushing vigorously through ravines and along enormous boulders, broadening towards the plains, becoming slow and placid in the dry season when passing by the famous river cities, and finally fanning out in the eastern delta and into the Bay of Bengal, a 2500 km journey.

The Ganges today, however, also has to tell another story, that of deforestation, melting glaciers, exploitation, pollution, and, indeed, damming. The author, Georgina Drew, describes and analyzes this chorus of voices in an unusually sensitive way. She honestly admits that she began her research 'with a strong, self-assured position that hydroelectric dam building in the Himalaya is, in almost all cases, a bad idea' (p. 189). Her first sympathies went to the local women who spoke out loudly against the dam building in Uttarakhand, the western Himalayan state in which the river is said to have its origin. Once the three contested dams on the highest reaches of the Bhagirathi Ganga were successfully canceled—the result of an extremely diverse multiplicity of arguments from various stakeholders—she began to be aware of a shifting tune in the debate. The same interlocutors appeared to criticize the process by which the cancellation of the dam projects had taken place, and its implication for mountain livelihoods, especially since the building sites had been abandoned without seeing to the remediation of those sites. Instead of the huge dams that had previously been planned by 'outsiders', the mountain people had started to propose alternatives (small hydro-projects built on the tributaries of the Ganga; expanding options to generate solar and wind energy) and to invite state- and federal government-funded measures to promote economic opportunities in the region, alongside disaster mitigation strategies. What initially had seemed to be a relatively simple opposition between development and conservation, or between science, engineering and religion along the Ganga's Himalayan flow, turned out to be a multilayered resistance movement. Seemingly advantageous schemes, such as the expansion of so-called Ecologically Sensitive Zones, were met with equal opposition.

When faced with these multiple perspectives and even a shift of positions among her interlocutors, the author sought ways to capture complexity as well as contingency. Her analysis is that of a political ecology examining the beneficiaries of the proposed projects and programs while acknowledging the Ganga as a ‘multiply interpreted entity subject to various cultural, religious, and political uses’ (p. 188). In doing so, she also makes us aware of the geopolitics of climate change and its spatial disparities: why should mountain people, already inadequately represented in policy decisions made by ‘plains people’ (i.e., in India’s capital, Delhi) accommodate the extravagant needs for electricity that people in the cities and the factories may have? Uttarkashi residents at first sight seem to have been successful and now continue to enact devotional practices by a flowing river considered a Goddess—Ganga Ma—and still engage in reverent clean-up campaigns around the river banks in anticipation of calendrical festivals, but they also defend their Himalayan livelihoods. It is clear that the river means many things to many people, and to treat the conflict solely as a conflict over resource use, or the Ganges as a predominantly religious entity, would severely underestimate the complexity of human needs and values.

Drew structures her book as follows. After introducing the topic of dams on the Ganga, as well as the movements and counter-movements involved in the conflict, she discusses the cultural politics at stake in the contestation of the dam building projects in Part One, and the political ecology of the local opposition movements in their debate with insiders, outsiders, and even the visiting scholar, in Part Two. She is thus able to give room to a chorus of voices. Although initially drawn towards the mountain women, their deep devotion to ‘Mother Ganga’, and the style of their activism—ranging from singing devotional songs together as part of their protest to argumentatively strengthening their voices in spite of obvious power differences when dealing with government officials, engineers, and development workers—the author gradually includes other voices and even counter-voices. For instance, visiting a pro-dam rally may offer new insights, nuances, and a welcome change of perspective. Listening to a semi-urban taxi driver who complains about the broken mountain roads left unrepaired after the dam construction was abandoned; to the son of one of the woman activists who attempts to run a hotel when tourists and trekkers stay away; or to the husband who has been forced to seek paid labor elsewhere. All these interactions and chance encounters shape, refine, and nuance the presentation of the ongoing conflict.

To readers of this journal the development encounters in religiously charged landscapes may sound familiar and probably predictable. Yet there is an edge here. The problems, predicaments, and positionings are universal but also locally and culturally specific. One of the tipping points in the initial conflict about the dam construction may well have been the voice of outsiders expressing political Hindutva rhetoric about ‘our’ tradition (*sanskriti*), ‘our’ Ganga, and ‘our’ ecologically sensitive values. However, not only in the corridors of power in Delhi were such sentiments articulated, but also by an engineer-turned-environmental-activist such as G.D. Agarwal, who, with his fasts-unto-death, may be seen as a positive vector but just as well as ‘high jacking’ the regional conflict as an environmental conflict and thus inviting similar critique as other Hindu-based opposition to dams. He may have been an engineer in the first part of his life, but his Ganga activism was based on faith, culture, and ‘Hindu tradition’ rather than scientific knowledge and his engineering profession (pp. 130-35).

More or less the same is valid for the Gandhian activist Sunderlal Bahuguna, whose efforts in the Chipko tree-logging protests (roughly around the 1970s) had gained him international acclaim as well as India's second highest civilian award, the 'Padma Vibhushan'. His long involvement in the Himalayan region made him one of the obvious fighters against the Ganga dam. In the eyes of his opponents, however, he represented the uncomfortable alliance between 'green' environmentalism and 'saffron' Hindu politics. This alliance may be called uneasy because environmentalists are often considered anti-national. Moreover, when facing how 'their' religious affects are being appropriated by people of 'name and fame' (the English phrase is often left untranslated, see p. 135), Garhwalis fear that the local voice (*local logon ki aavaaz*, p. 144) easily gets lost. Sadly, this was perceived as undue 'outsiders' influence and as 'Hinduizing' the conflict when the dam cancelations (in May of 2010) were seconded and the stretch of the Ganga from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi was declared an Eco-Zone, without consulting, as promised, 'all stakeholders' (p. 151). Often the inside reaction was that this ecozone and all its restrictions for the local inhabitants were being thrust upon them, keeping them and the area backward (p. 162).

Georgina Drew aptly titled her book 'River Dialogues'. This may be too modest. She presents more than dialogues; she presents a multiplicity of voices that does justice to a regional conflict that is at the same time a national and a global conflict. I therefore recommend this book to all readers of this journal, not only to water activists or proponents respectively critical of the 'greening of religion' thesis. Reading Drew's analysis of what the 'sacred Ganga' represents to a variety of people with a plethora of interests at stake may bring a welcome nuance to the entire religion-nature-culture nexus.

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