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Georgina Drew
University of Adelaide, georginadrew@gmail.com

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Beyond Contradiction: Sacred-Profane Waters and the Dialectics of Everyday Religion

Georgina Drew

Studies of the relationship between religion and ecology are either highly enthusiastic about the ways that religious belief can motivate sound resource management or skeptical of the connection. Using an everyday religion approach, this text takes a middle ground to show that resources are variously interpreted in daily life and that religious orientations, while potentially supportive of environmentally sound action, are but one source of influence. Drawing from fieldwork, the discussion employs practice theory to look at how water resources in a Himalayan township are understood and the ways that notions of responsibility for sacred and profane waters are changing. The text aims to show that resource degradation is not necessarily indicative of contradictions in belief. This assertion pushes us to think more critically about the importance of everyday terrains of discourse and action, including how resource perceptions and management activities are influenced by structural constraints.

Keywords: everyday religion, practice theory, Garhwal Himalaya, water resource management.

Introduction: A Dialectical Approach to Everyday Religion and Resource Management

Why do devotees pollute sacred rivers, desecrate sentient mountaintops, and allow landscapes filled with temples to various gods and goddesses to be inundated by dams? Questions such as these have motivated a wide set of scholarship on the relationship between religion, ecology, and environmental resource management. Initially, much of the work focused on the role of the great religions of the world such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism. Recent research departs slightly from the focus on the influence of official, codified forms of religion to look at the ways that people draw from other sources of inspiration in their daily interactions with the material worlds upon which they depend. Such scholarship explores the religious dimensions of nature affinities and everyday environmental practices with the understanding that they can illuminate relations of religion and environment left hidden by a focus on the global traditions (Jenkins and Chapple 2011: 443). This article engages this latter area of inquiry while using practice theory to explore relationships between everyday religion and environmental resource management among self-identified Hindus in the Garhwal ethnolinguistic region of Uttarkhand, India. Before going into the fieldwork specifics, I first discuss what some have said about the relationship between Hindu beliefs and resource management, and what practice theory can do to illuminate such inquiries.

The study of the Hindu faith or Hinduism is complex and its parameters are intensely debated by scholars of religion.[1] As complicated as the Hindu faith is to definitively explain, the field becomes even more fraught when questions of environmental resource management are added. On the one hand, numerous scholars have argued that Hinduism contains, embedded in its doctrine and teachings, several calls to respect nature and to conserve entities such as sacred rivers, forests, and mountains. This work adds to studies of Hinduism and Ecology. The field has shown that there are many religious texts that urge reverent and environmentally sound behavior (Chapple 1993, 1998; Coward 1998; Dwivedi 2000; Jain 2011; Tucker & Chapple 2000). On the other hand, many point out that contemporary practices conducted alongside sacred natural resources, including the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers, have led to their environmental degradation. They argue that this reveals limits to a reliance on religious precepts for the sound management of resources and that we need to examine the wider social, economic, and political landscapes that influence resource use into our analyses (Agarwal 2000; Ahmed 1996; Alley 2000, 2002; Haberman 2006; Nagaranjan 2000). As Rademacher (2011) poignantly notes in the case of environmental degradation along the Bagmati River in Nepal, to understand reactions to ecological change we must also engage the social dynamics experienced in everyday life that form mosaics of "moral logic, aspiration, and struggles over power" (183).

On the surface, the divide between what Hindu texts say and what is practiced seems to illustrate contradictions. What if, however, the inclination to see religious contradiction in ecological praxis is a limitation of our expectations of complete adherence to teachings and doctrine? What happens when we remind ourselves that religious ideals and practices have frequently been contested over the course of history and that ideas of proper conduct are constantly mediated in new and evolving contexts? If we make that shift, is there a way to turn what seems like contradiction into evidence of adaptation, negotiation, and contestation? Indeed, this is exactly what an everyday religion approach can do.

Studies of everyday religion focus on how people navigate complexity by evoking a higher moral, metaphysical, and spiritual order while innovating within in-between spaces of ambiguity, uncertainty, anxiety, creative play, and contestation.[2] These moments are insightful not because they are exceptional but because they approximate the "essential way" in which religion is lived as part of human lives (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 7). The choices that people make, as Rademacher suggested earlier, are firmly situated in power-laden struggles that include personal, familial, social, economic, and political terrains. Added to this, a driving point for this article is the assertion that to understand the seemingly anachronistic phenomena evidenced by everyday religious practices, we must examine the tensions between structure and agency that is the foundational premise of theories of practice stemming from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990). The inclusion of practice theory helps illuminate how and why people act in response to existing constraints and options.

With the above in mind, this paper starts from the observation that resource challenges emerge and proliferate amidst the ongoing interplay between institutional structures and individual or collective agency. The terrain of struggle over resources, following Bourdieu's concepts, represents a field that hosts the constraining forces of existing infrastructures, agencies, and socioeconomic systems. In this field, there are rules of engagement in which people enact strategies or ways to play the "game" (Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes 1990). The ways in which people might think of and respond to the predetermined structures around them is additionally influenced by the durable dispositions of *habitus* that reflect the ongoing, ever-evolving impact of historical influences on individual and collective subjectivities (Ortner 2006). Ultimately, these insights provide a means to understand the relationality between objectivism, the realm of structures, and subjectivism, the realm of experience and agency. To break beyond these limitations, as Bourdieu argued we need to do, "...one has to return to practice, the site of the dialectic of the *opus operatum* and the *modus operandi*; of the objectified products and the incorporated products of historical practice; of structures and *habitus*" (Bourdieu 1990: 52).

In this article, I argue that practice theory eases some of the methodological and conceptual stickiness of studying everyday religion by empowering us to examine at once the inherited dispositions that Bourdieu (1977, 1990) referred to as *habitus*, the complex relations that people encounter in the everyday world, and the broader struggles that encompass many localities and longer periods of time. This emphasis attends to the internal conflict and the hard-won personal and social struggles that can produce the hybridity that authors of everyday religion describe.

In applying the insights of practice theory to the study of resource management, I also argue that we can think of ideas about resource management as being dialectically formed, shaped, and reconfigured. This is particularly true in the Garhwal Himalaya where scientific epistemologies of an externalized environment subject to human domination does not necessarily settle with the

cosmologically-oriented ways that people have historically approached the resources and landscapes that surround them (Campbell 2011). Indeed, resources in Garhwal are oftentimes viewed as sentient beings in ways that can impact their treatment (Drew 2012). There is a need, therefore, to engage in the meaning-making practices of everyday life wherein the ordinary, daunting, and exhilarating realities of human experience are "taken hold of" by men and women in "the company of their gods" (Orsi 2012: 153).

In the sections that follow, practice theory is employed to examine the generative yet fluid character of everyday religion and its implications for resource management. I begin by establishing Uttarkashi as a space of investigation before examining how water resources in the township are variously interpreted and acted upon in everyday terrains of belief and action. In my discussion of the links between water and the divine, I emphasize the importance of the relationships that Uttarkashi residents have with a tributary that is labeled on maps as the Bhagirathi or the Bhagirathi Ganga. Since this river is called the Ganga by my interlocutors and revered as the actual Ganga in everyday practice, I henceforth use this nomenclature (rather than referring to it as the Bhagirathi Ganga) in keeping with the regionally prevalent term.

Situating the Field: Uttarkashi as an Urbanizing Sacred Landscape

To expand on the above theoretical points with empirical insight, the following study draws from fieldwork conducted in Uttarkashi, India in 2012 to explore everyday religious and ecological practice. The capital of a district by the same name, Uttarkashi is an administrative and commercial hub located in a northwestern region of Garhwal, an ethnolinguistic zone in Uttarakhand State near the border of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), People's Republic of China. On the map of Hindu sacred geography, Uttarkashi is an auspicious place for worship known as a *tirtha*. Additionally, because the sacred River Ganga flows through the urbanizing town, it is an important pilgrimage destination for Hindus. Devotees of the Goddess Ganga and of Lord Shiva travel in large numbers to the mountainous township of 60,000 people during the summer months and many of them journey further up to Gangotri, which is one of the four highly revered Himalayan temples known as *chardham* that are scattered across the mountaintops.

Upon first encounter, Uttarkashi does not seem to easily lend itself to the study of everyday religion. As one of the abodes of Lord Shiva, it is featured in several of the old scriptures known as *purana* that are considered to be some of the foundational texts of the Hindu faith. Uttarkashi is also honored regionally as an important site in Garhwal's sacred landscape of Gods and Goddesses known as *dev bhoomi*. For this reason, and also for its rugged, scenic, and historically depopulated terrain, it is home to religious saints and wandering ascetics such as the *sadhu* that are iconic spiritual figures in Hindu practice. Peppered as it is with temples and sites of worship along the Ganga, many of the religious acts that one observes appear to fit within the more codified practices that are part of official Hinduism. For some, such acts do not conform to the definition of everyday religion, which is said to largely operate

Figure 1. Image of the River Ganga Flowing through Uttarkashi.

(Drew, 2009)

outside of the domain of organized religious events and institutions (Ammerman 2007: 5). This perspective stems, in part, from the attempt to explain the tensions between the strongly normative character of organized religion and the sometimes anomalous ways that people live their religious lives. Since such distinctions needlessly differentiate between doctrine versus enactment (Orsi 1997), a more useful focus is to look across the board at the differences between what people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds believe they *should do* versus what they *actually do*. This is the spirit with which I undertake my examinations of everyday religion and resource management in Uttarkashi.

To ground the study within Uttarkashi's complex religious and ecological landscape, I conducted investigations in 2012 that focused on people's interactions and relationships with profane and sacred (or profane-sacred) water resources. The questions posed inquired into people's religious practices to particular deities and their use of water during rites such as morning and evening prayers. This effort placed emphasis on the ways that orientations to water in Uttarkashi have changed over time. The topic-specific inquiry built upon knowledge of the region I acquired during long-term fieldwork in Uttarkashi in 2007, 2008, and 2009. Water was chosen as a focal point because of its everyday dependencies, life-giving qualities, cultural and religious symbolism, and resource management challenges (Johnston et al. 2011). Since water is so necessary for everyday life, its investigation readily leads to questions of belief and practice as enacted by ordinary-extraordinary people contending with life's day-to-day circumstances. In other words, social studies of water help draw out the complexities of lived experience, a cornerstone of the ethnographic approach.[3]

The methodology did not focus on site-specific water resource use for several reasons. First, it was logistically difficult to focus on water flows as much of Uttarkashi's supplies are either in transit through pipes or flowing through the Ganga. Uttarkashi has a relatively abundant supply of drinking water with nearly 90% of the population served by the public water system (CSE 2012). A potential result of this central water provision is that there are no main collection sites in the center of town that are frequently used, with the exception of a few tube wells.[4] Due to the lack of a central location in which one can observe people collecting water, the primary method employed was household visits in which questions were asked about water use and waste management in both daily and ideal practice.[5]

Water in Uttarkashi: A Diversely-Interpreted Resource

In Uttarkashi, water's importance is enhanced by the recognition that it is an entity endowed by the gods. Whether it comes from the sky, flows through the township in the form of the Ganga, or is used for daily Hindu rituals, water is one of the most tangible connections to the divine that people encounter in their day-to-day lives. Yet, as the discussion shows, water is also increasingly the purview of local and regional governing bodies. While water's religious significances continue to be upheld, new structures and management strategies are challenging the ways that people think about their daily actions, and their options for action, in relation to the waters upon which they depend. A discussion of the Ganga's use by Uttarkashi residents offers a helpful illustration.

The Ganga is one of the most prominent water Goddesses in Hindu faith. Her numerous creation stories are featured in several Hindu texts. Stories of the river's significance also pepper great Indian epics such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. According to Hindu belief, the river was born when a mortal known as King Bhagiratha beseeched the Goddess Ganga to descend from the heavens in liquid form so that the ashes of his ancestors could be purified and their souls saved from damnation. After her fall through Shiva's locks and her journey through the Himalaya to the Bay of Bengal, the Ganga continued to flow through the ages to offer physical and spiritual salvation to all that are fortunate enough to chance upon her sacred waters. In texts such as the *Skandpuran*, it is stated that devotees can gain salvation for themselves and their ancestors by worshipping the Ganga in Uttarkashi at especially auspicious sites such as steps leading to the river at Manikarnika Ghat.

Respect for the Ganga shapes interactions with the river in ways that are often, but not always, consistent with Hindu teachings. When approaching the Ganga, devotees will first usually remove their shoes and join the palms of their hands with their head down in a gesture of respectful greeting referred to as an act of *pranam* or *namaskar*. The signs of respect may also include the observance of proscriptions such as the removal of shoes prior to nearing the waters. According to the stories told by residents, when the first footbridges were built to cross the river, people insisted on walking across barefoot as to do otherwise was viewed as disrespectful. These actions were in keeping with mandates in several Hindu texts that deplored any form of polluting activity in or near the Ganga, including the use of soaps or the disposal of wastes in the river. The observance of these edicts has loosened over time, the

reasons for which have been a subject of consternation and investigation for many (Ahmed 1995; Alley 2000, 2002; Haberman 2006; Chapman and Thompson 1995). It is now common to see devotees deposit plastic bags filled with trash in the river, sometimes even right after they have done extensive rituals to gain the Goddess' blessings. Near to the sites at which such activities are evident, municipal drains also deposit much of the town's sewage directly into the river. In 2006, about 70 percent of flushed waste was let into the Ganga without treatment via pour latrines, septic tanks, or by direct discharge (CSE 2012: 43-44). Evidence of the accumulating pollutants is most obvious at the hydropower reservoir slightly downstream from Manikarnika Ghat. The still water is often filled with plastic bottles, miscellaneous trash, and brackish ooze.

Despite the blasé attitude of some of the polluters, there was and is considerable concern among residents about the Ganga's worsening state. Since the 1990's, several groups emerged to challenge river pollution and to raise awareness about the need to conserve the river for environmental and religious reasons. Pressure was also applied on the government to create better waste management schemes. Since the town's drainage system was "in complete disrepair" and "non-functional," the municipality opted for a new system that they began installing from 2006 onwards (CSE 2012: 45).[6] The infrastructure was geared towards intercepting sewage, adding sewers, constructing new pumping stations and sewage treatment facilities, and providing low-cost sanitation units. Many of these improvements were instituted along the banks of the river near the town center. Sadly, they have since been destroyed due to two massive floods in 2012 and 2013 that dramatically changed Uttarkashi's landscape.[7]

Water: A Gift from Regional Gods

Moving away from iconic resources such as the sacred Ganga, I next focus on the relationship between water resources and the regional gods that people in Uttarkashi revere. Across the mountain landscape of Garhwal, an abundant number of site-specific gods or *devta* reside in the homes and villages that dot the region and each of these have their own histories, attributes, and sources of power. Focusing on the *devta*, including their roles in the activities of everyday life such as the collection and maintenance of water, allows me to step away from what my respondents called the "elite" strains of Hinduism—the beliefs and practices that are commonly found in the Indian plains and which over the last few decades have come to dominate regional practices.[8] Tensions have risen from the acculturation processes. This is due to a perception that dominant 'nationalist' forms of Hinduism have pushed out what some perceive in the region as their older and more regionally-specific religious enactments.[9] The difficulty with placing too much emphasis on this tension, however, is that it rests on another false dichotomy: the traditional, which is often read as fixed in an idealized past, and the mainstream, which is often read as coherent and all imposing. In actuality, what is seen as tradition has likely been in fluctuation over waves of sociocultural change and struggles for power and what is seen as mainstream are the highly visible yet fluid aspects of an otherwise heterogeneous and adaptable set of Hindu beliefs and practices.

In Uttarkashi, the most prominent regional god is known as Kandar Devta. He is revered as a protector and guardian of the township. It is said that he knows the life stories of everyone born in Uttarkashi and that he is able to provide guidance to them in times of need. He can, for instance, help people find lost items, determine the cause of ailments and prescribe treatments, solve domestic disputes (often by outing a liar or the culprit of some deceit), fix or disapprove of marriages, and counter the effects of black magic. Kandar Devta performs these actions by either speaking through one of his attendants or by making movements interpreted by priests who ritually place his statue in a wooden palanquin. By making to and fro gestures when carried on the shoulders of men, the *devta* speaks in a kind of divine sign language with his devotees. Most of the time, however, he can be found in statue form in his numerous temples throughout the region where he blesses those who pay him tribute. Depending on who is consulted, and reflecting the earlier noted trend to fit regional gods within a larger Hindu pantheon, Kandar Devta is often identified as an aspect (or minor embodiment) of Lord Shiva. Other residents stated that they think of him more as a servant of Shiva. In one framing, an interlocutor likened Kandar Devta to a general in Shiva's divine army.

Kandar Devta is important to the discussions of everyday religion and resource management because he is believed to be one of several *devta* in Uttarkashi with the power to bring rain. When drought threatens, or simply in the hopes of a good rice or wheat crop, devotees gather at one of his temples, perform a ceremony, and ask for rain. However, Kandar Devta doesn't give such boons easily. Speaking through priests, he is known to prescribe long and arduous rituals for the fulfillment of desires. In February of 2011, for instance, there was a serious draught in Sangrauli, a village without running water located in the hills overlooking Uttarkashi. To remedy the situation, Kandar Devta, speaking through the local priests, proclaimed that a four-day *puja* or ritual needed to be performed in an even

Figure 2. Devotees Prepare to Worship Kandar Devta in his *Dholi* on the Occasion of Makar Sankranti.

(Drew, 2014)

higher village near the crest of the hills. Diligently, the attendants and priests went to the hilltop, but after two days they became cold and uncomfortable. They asked to return to the village and finish the ceremony but the *devta* insisted they stay, promising that rain would come if they did. In the end, the priests overturned the decision and brought him back down the mountain in his palanquin to complete the ritual. When they returned, the *devta* refused to speak through the priests. He could not be roused for 41 days, according to one interlocutor, and the rains didn't come for three months. The crops were lost and people had to migrate temporarily until water returned to the village.

The lack of rains did not lessen devotion to the *devta*. It may, in fact, have served to reinforce belief in Kandar Devta's omniscience and omnipotence. As one interlocutor from the village commented, "We still ask for rain. It still comes. If it doesn't come, we still have faith in the *devta*." He added that the *denewala*, or the "one who gives," has his reasons for bestowing fortune as well as suffering. This devotee's stance perhaps reflects generations of experiential knowledge in which consistent communion with the *devta* reinforced residents' understandings of him as a guardian and protector.

Yet, the fact that people occasionally disobey Kandar Devta, as in the above example, demonstrates that the fear that kept people obeying the gods and their mandates is loosening. Commands—including those with environmental overtones such as the mandate to preserve certain tracks of land, forest, or water—are being disregarded. In the eyes of some interlocutors, this has implications for resource perceptions and management practices. Commenting on the seemingly diminished beliefs in the repercussions that can result from disobeying the gods and their commands, a middle-aged woman from the Indian plains who relocated to the hills above Uttarkashi made the following observations:

> You know, [in the past] there were certain ponds and lakes where you were not supposed to bathe, you were not supposed to take your shoes. There were [also] certain areas where you could not enter with leather. Now people... don't actually think about those things anymore. [They don't think:] 'Why these things were banned? Why that fear was instilled?' They don't look into the source of the 'why?' They only want to break the rules and go in and destroy. A lot of places with these sacred trees, sacred sources of water where you were not supposed to break a branch, break a leaf—kids these days go and destroy them just for the heck of it, saying 'look at what I've done and nothing has happened to me'. [They do this] without realizing that there was a deeper esoteric philosophical meaning behind saying, 'Don't do this.' They don't take that into account anymore.

Despite the disregard expressed in these two examples, some are working to remind people of the *devta*'s historic role as guardian in order to compel more upstanding environmental action. The above mentioned woman and her husband, a man of British origins who is a naturalized Indian citizen living near Uttarkashi, decided to create awareness about waste and water management by working with people near Sangrauli to help them understand that sound environmental actions are pleasing to the *devta*. The husband explained that it is through relationships with the *devta* and the villagers that a meaningful impact can be achieved because, in his words, "In the end it is all about relationships, really." His comments pointed to

the importance of the sociality and responsibility that is felt through lives lived in communion with all-knowing and at times reprimanding gods. Such responses are what some might consider place-based approaches to fostering sound resource management that takes into consideration localized orientations to the land and its non-human inhabitants. Both wife and husband noted, however, that the process is difficult and that their efforts have to contend with the esteem that villagers have for the accumulation of products that are valorized as signs of modernization and material progress. The plastic bags and bottles that eventually find their ways into the streams and rivers, for instance, are viewed as signs of convenience and evidence of one's purchasing power. The couple's work, which involves the promotion of consequential thinking, tries to get people to understand the negative impact that these items have on the land, streams, and rivers that their livelihoods depend upon and that their regional gods demand they protect.

While there are some indications that such campaigns in the villages overlooking Uttarkashi are having a positive effect, similar efforts in the township are met with mixed reception, partly due to the growing emphasis on municipal responsibility for water and waste management.

Water: A Municipal Responsibility

As in the villages, shifting notions of responsibility for water and waste management are readily perceptible in Uttarkashi. The new sentiments are especially evident in the attitudes of the young adults living in the urbanizing township. In the final subsection on water perception and management, I turn to the generational divides as a way of exploring the ways that water is increasingly seen as a purview not of the gods but of regional municipalities and state governments. I also show that sound water management is but one of the numerous concerns that residents of Uttarkashi have for the future. This acknowledgement helps to illuminate the broader structural and socioeconomic influences that additionally shape everyday actions.

An exchange with a grandmother and granddaughter illustrates the ways that people are reorienting their understandings of water management. The two women live in an economically struggling and agrarian-based part of the town, about a stone's throw away from the aforementioned reservoir. When I met the grandmother and granddaughter, Altra and Rekha Devi, they were sitting on the rooftop of their two-story home caring for an infant. The conversation followed the script of the questionnaire, beginning with basic questions about water availability and quality. Their answers were similar to what others had shared. Their household, for instance, used a minimal amount of water—about five 20-liter buckets a day—which they sometimes sourced from local wells as the municipal supply was inconsistent. They disposed of dirty water the same way their neighbors do, by putting it down the drain. When pressed, they conceded that this water likely goes to the river Ganga. For this reason, and also because the reservoir near their home was stagnant and putrid smelling, they described the river as polluted or *ganda*. Altra Devi confessed that this made her feel bad as she would rather not have to defile the Ganga, but she saw no other option in lieu of proper municipal infrastructure and waste management. To compensate, she goes to an upstream location, where the river runs cleaner, and puts a few drops of water from the Ganga on her forehead while asking for forgiveness. She clarified, however, that just because the river was dirty—*ganda*—it was still ritually pure or *shudh* "no matter how polluted" it becomes.[10] While stealing a stern glance at her granddaughter, who earlier called the river impure or *ashudh*, she cautioned that in the past those who did not believe in the Ganga's purity would be struck with leprosy.

Altra Devi was as ardently devoted to the Ganga as she was to the *devta* and she made frequent references to their inter-relationality. After all, she reasoned, it is the Ganga, a water goddess, who blesses the *devta* and augments their powers. And it is the *devta* who bring rain, a water element. Even though she strongly believed in the necessity of propitiating the *devta* to ask for rains before each harvest, she admitted that she has become too old to partake in such activities and that the youth seem less inclined to continue the tradition. The granddaughter, Rekha, chose this opportunity to enter into the conversation, explaining that her generation still believes in the *devta* but "not as much as people used to." As an example, she asserted that she and her friends go to the temple of various *devta* but they do not believe that these gods can help bring rain. In her view, water provision is now the role of the government in the same way that it is up to the state to provide education, infrastructure, and health services. In other words, both of these women expressed reverence for their water sources and the devta but these two things did not motivate what we might consider 'sound' environmental practices. Instead, they deflected responsibility for proper waste and water management to the municipality and the state government.

The constraining force of existing water management structures is evident in the above commentary. What underlies Altra Devi's seemingly contradictory practice

is her effort to exert some semblance of historically-consistent practice and exert agency despite the structural constraints. The fact that her granddaughter does not engage in similar activities is an example of the changing *habitus* of the newer generations. Intergenerational change is leading to a concomitant transformation in how people acquire knowledge about the value of existing structures, past practices, and contemporary challenges. This seems anomalous. On the one hand, religious ways of knowing and experiencing Uttarkashi's sacred landscape are being challenged by scientific and techno-managerial ideas of how water sources should treated. On the other hand, knowledge that polluted water is chemically and biologically hazardous does not yet seem to motivate sustained environmental action because of the growing emphasis on municipal responsibility over personal responsibility.

Even though some people have 'woken up' to the need for proactive efforts, these actors find that they hold the minority position. As mentioned, several anti-pollution campaigns have been launched in Uttarkashi since the early 1990's but these have waned and faded over time. The organizers of the first campaign to regularly clean the Ganga informed me that their efforts were short-lived because they realized that their work had a very limited impact on transforming the riverbank, let alone the quality of the water. On one side, fellow residents seem nonplussed by the action and would often pollute in front of the cleaning committees. On the other side, the municipality continued to allow sewage to seep into local water supplies at rates that no civic action could meaningfully address. Reflecting on the challenges, almost all the respondents to my survey mentioned that the most important thing that could be done to protect the environment in Uttarkashi was improved governance and a reduction in corruption.[11]

The surveys also revealed that environmental issues are low on the list of priorities. When asked about their biggest concerns for the future, respondents overwhelmingly asserted that the lack of employment, industry, and educational opportunities in the mountains are the most pressing challenges for current and future generations. Women respondents stressed their concerns for the poor quality of education and healthcare. Only the most educated among those surveyed, five out of twenty, expressed concern for water availability, food security, and the scenarios associated with global warming in their responses to the questions that prompted them to think of current and pending problems. The priority placed on employment, education, and health indicates that social resilience—what some might call social sustainability—is as important as what we might term environmental sustainability.[12] This is part of what others have phrased the "environmentalism of the poor," in that livelihoods are placed on par with concerns for the environment (Martinez Alier 2005). What this underscores, once again, are the real structural constraints under which people are operating and which have influenced notions of the most significant challenges at hand.

Conclusions and Further Inquiry

In my appraisal of the different domains in which water is diversely perceived, I argue that practice theory is a helpful tool to examine the everyday religious character of resource management. By focusing on moments in which people's attitudes and actions are called into question, practice theory enables us to delve into the complex process in which religious orientations to resources are made subject to revision. While others have labeled this a process of 'creolization' that demonstrates, the degree of agency ordinary people exercise in the construction of their lived religions (McGuire 2008: 196),[13] practice theory keeps a focus on the imbalanced and pre-existing terrains in which such choices are made. Although McGuire and others may be appropriately describing the phenomena of hybridity in their explanations of everyday religion as creolization, practice theory retains attention on contentious processes through which new practices are adopted amidst shifting structures and the changing dispositions of *habitus*. This acknowledgement helps prevent us from thinking of actors as freewheeling agents with the power and the will to adopt and meld ideas as they see fit, rather than people contending with enduring struggles across time, space, and place.[14]

In addition to establishing the complex and contentious terrain in which resource decisions are made, what the effort to string together connections between everyday religion, water resource management, and sustainable environments does is focus our gaze on a diverse set of measures for, and approaches to, the quest for wellbeing as it is enacted by people contending with the circumstances of everyday life. The values and meanings that are employed in this pursuit extend beyond those determined by vernacular, popular, or even official religion. After all, religious values compete and overlap with influences derived outside their frameworks (Devine and Deneulin 2011: 64) including values originating from scientific or environmental discourse which are at any rate neither definitive nor overwhelmingly influential to human behavior (Shove 2003). The competing values may come from, or be embedded in, cultural mores and social structures over which people have little conscious control. And yet, as the examples given demonstrate, people do make active

choices within terrains of normative (and shifting) disposition, and they exert agency. The end result is that, even as people navigate uncertainty with the understanding that cultural, structural, political, and cosmic forces are at play, they also see opportunities to make decisions and to forge their own paths.

An argument in support of everyday religion as a useful approach, in light of the shifts underway, is the ease with which it allows us to explore the ground-up generativity and becomingness of religious belief, practice, and praxis. While Hindu faith may very well be one of the important media through which new forms are generated in places such as Uttarkashi, the Garhwal region, or the Hindu-identified populations of North India, everyday religious practice can reveal and highlight the fluidity of people's relationships with others as well as the socio-ecological landscapes of which they are a part. These relationships are in turn impacted by the flow of resources, native and foreign, imbued with cultural capital. As the frequency of exchange of objects, ideas, and religious orientations increases, so does the rate at which people must implicitly or explicitly answer to themselves and to others the question of what they value and why.

The answers to these questions are difficult and subject to change. This is why a focus on religious contradiction in resource management has limited utility. Indeed, if we look closely we may even find that seeming contradictions may not even exist in the perception of our interlocutors. This approach to everyday religion emphasizes fluid processes of assimilation as well as negotiation and resistance in the complex socio-economic, political, and ecological terrains in which people are situated. Such fluidities can be found when people debate the need to rely on local gods for resource demands or the impact that seemingly unavoidable polluting activities have on sacred water resources. These processes show how people engage in active efforts to live meaningful and upstanding lives in contexts where they are subject to a range of structural constraints, stimuli, and conflicting sources of information. In looking at the broad set of factors that people encounter, insights also emerge on why people are motivated by other concerns—such as employment and opportunities for economic mobility—rather than merely the conservation of resources.

Whether a person is debating notions of ideal religious practice, knowingly polluting divine waters, or deciding not to worship a god that one's family has revered for generations, hard decisions are being made that are significant for our understanding of how and why people act. Further efforts to understand the relationship between everyday religion and sound resource management will do well to engage the ways that relationships to resources tie into notions of self or identity in rapidly changing cultural and socio-economic contexts (Campbell 2011). This focus will help deter the impulse to either condemn or praise syncretic practices without due attention to the subjective shifts of thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors. This work is a useful step toward efforts to examine how environmental projects, programs, and policies could align, or be made compatible with, ground realities and orientations to the non-human world. Such initiatives can engage the range of beliefs, preoccupations, and hardships that people encounter everyday while advancing new dialogues about the current and looming ecological crises confronting the Himalaya. As Lélé and Norgaard remind us, 'The greater the self-reflection, cultural sensitivity, and perception of social structures, the greater the likelihood of scientist-activists achieving ethical contentment, social respect, and real-world results' (1996: 363).

Georgina Drew is a Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies at the University of Adelaide in South Australia. From 2011-2013, she served as a Postdoctoral Fellow at The New School's India China Institute where she helped coordinate a project on Everyday Religion and Sustainable Environments in the Himalaya with funding from the Henry Luce Foundation. Georgina's work is centered in issues of environmental subjectivity, gender and sustainable resource management, social movement studies, and the cultural and religious politics of development. She has also coordinated research in various Himalayan locations in China, India, and Nepal.

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Endnotes)

1. The Hindu faith—sometimes referred to as Hinduism or as *sanatana dharma*—is a highly varied and amorphous set of beliefs and practices that have evolved greatly over time. It is at once a religion of countless oral teachings, of many books, and of numerous elaborate ritual and devotional practices that are the product of extensive processes of acculturation over the last several millennia. Because of this variation and also because of its overlap with other religious followings, some prefer to think of it as a doctrine rather than a religion (Balagangadhara 2005).

2. The study of everyday religion combines questions prominent in religious studies with anthropological and sociological examinations of meaning making and practice in daily life. The term signals an intention to move beyond the split between official, doctrine-based practice with vernacular manifestations of religious life (Orsi 1997). Since religion involves all of these domains and more, the emphasis on the everyday helps to overcome gaps in some scholarly approaches by focusing on the moments where daily practice and "grand schemes" come together (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 2). Such practices, and the struggles for wellbeing implied by grand schemes, are dependent on a material base integrated within life-supporting landscapes filled with meaning, symbolism, and divinity (See also Larrimore's contribution in this issue).

3. Scholarship in environmental studies has also begun to focus on the practices and experiences that constitute the "barely detectable gridlines of everyday life" in which people act upon, and interact with, resources (Shove 2003: 2).

4. The Ganga is sourced for drinking water only when the piped water supply is disrupted.

5. Data collection involved twenty questionnaires, ten interviews, and five life histories.

6. The funds were allocated through the second phase of the Ganga Action Plan, which identified Uttarkashi as one of six eligible towns in the state of Uttarakhand. By December 2008, Uttarkashi had spent 76% of the approved amount of 62,500,000 INR [roughly $1.5 million at the time] to prevent pollution in the Bhagirathi (CSE 2012: 45).

7. The first flash flood struck Uttarkashi on August 4, 2012. It claimed numerous lives, swallowed houses and bridges, and destroyed much of the water and sewage management infrastructure. Exponentially exacerbating this calamity, the region was struck by even more severe floods in mid-June of 2013 that simultaneously filled the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda riverbeds. The water situation in Uttarkashi and elsewhere initially deteriorated, as did the quality of life.

8. This observation was also made by the project's research assistant, Mr. Jayahari Srivastava, who helped conduct interviews and fill out questionnaires.

9. One of the characteristics of this trend is the reification of a relatively small selection of Gods and Goddesses whose worship is emphasized by Hindu nationalists (Nandy 2001).

10. Numerous other respondents made the assertion that the Ganga could be "dirty" and ritually pure (and thus still sacred) at the same time. This aligns with Kelly Alley's (2002) work on pollution in the Ganga in Varanasi. Note, however, that young respondents, those between 18-25 such as Altra Devi's granddaughter, were more apt to say that the river is not just dirty but outright "polluted," and that this hurts the river's ritual purity.

11. The word used to refer to the environment was the Hindi term *paryavaran*.

12. A common definition of sustainability is the one given by the Bruntland Commission in 1987 which, to loosely paraphrase, equates the term with actions that support the livelihood privileges and resource rights of future generations. This definition of sustainability is

concerned with the longevity of human populations, which it places at the center of its concerns. This is not the only orientation towards sustainability, as Lélé and Norgaard (1996) suggest. They argue that an objective, 'consensual,' or universal definition of sustainability is not only improbable but also undesirable. Instead, they propose a need to examine the independently emerging answers to questions of sustainability, which they assert may involve a combination of the value judgments, knowledges, and cultural views that are relative to the institutions and social processes of the locations where they are enacted (1996: 335). While I find these debates productive, I do not emphasize discussions of sustainability in this article because the term was not frequently articulated in Uttarkashi and because many of my interlocutors, even those that spoke English, did not have a working definition for the word. This is one of the key reasons that I chose to focus primarily on how people see and respond to water management challenges.

13. As McGuire additionally argues, "This way of thinking about bricolage and syncretism is particularly useful for understanding how some people in a culturally complex modern society may be creatively selecting and adapting cultural traditions for use in their own practice and identities" (2008: 197).

14. This is not to say that people do not have agency. Scholarship in subaltern studies, for instance, has shown that even the most marginalized people engage in critique, resistance, and the formation of novel identities and cultural forms.

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