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*Review of River Dialogues: Hindu Faith and the  
Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga* by  
Georgina Drew

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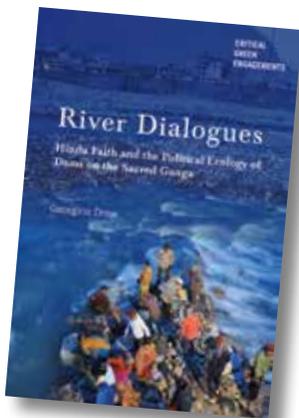
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***River Dialogues: Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga.***

**Georgina Drew.** Critical Green Engagements. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017. 258 pages. ISBN 9780816535101.

**Reviewed by Brian Pennington**

Based on eight years of field research along the upper reaches of a major

tributary of India's Ganga River, this book probes the range of opinions about hydroelectric development expressed by residents who lived along the river valley during the author's period of study. The technical name of the waterway that *River Dialogues* examines, from its glacial source at Gaumukh until it joins the Alaknanda further downriver to form the Ganga, is the Bhagirathi River. Local residents as well as Hindus at large, however, understand it as the holiest stretch of the Ganga itself, Hindu India's most sacred river and a goddess in her own right. Twenty-four kilometers below Gaumukh stands Gangotri, a major Hindu pilgrimage destination and the site of the temple that celebrates Ganga's mythological descent from the heavens. Another 100 kilometers downriver one comes to Uttarkashi, the pilgrimage town and district headquarters where Drew's work was centered and the lower limit of what the Indian government declared an Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) in 2012. *River Dialogues* is an exploration of debates over development and conservation in this ecologically fragile and religiously significant river valley as well as an ethnographic study of the lives of women activists who participated in those debates.

Georgina Drew's primary argument proceeds from her recognition that in cases such as the Ganga, where resources are revered, political ecology alone is insufficient for understanding and assessing resource

conflict. "Political ecology is useful because it focuses on the disparate power dynamics that influence how certain practices, ideologies, and policies of resource management are promoted over others" and because it emphasizes "who gains and who loses from these processes," she writes (p. 6). The status of the Ganga as a goddess whom many of Drew's interlocutors regarded as an intimate presence in their lives, however, as well as the river's central place in Hindu cosmology and practice, also demands, she argues, a concern for cultural politics and religion.

The necessity of an anthropology of Himalayan activism that is informed by both political ecology and a religiously attentive cultural politics emerged in the course of Drew's research. Over time, she observed activists once passionately opposed to dams adopt more dam-friendly positions as the ramifications of a complete halt to hydroelectric construction became clear: declining employment options, electricity shortages, abandoned dam construction sites, and empty, useless tunnels. Hindus in the ethno-linguistic region of Garhwal where the Bhagirathi River runs displayed multiple and often conflicting perspectives on hydroelectric development along the sacred waterway. On the one hand, political ecology, with its concern for resources and conflicts over their allocation, could not account for the motivations of those who fought the dams on the basis

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**Brian Pennington on *River Dialogues: Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of Dams on the Sacred Ganga***

of personal devotion; on the other, an overemphasis on the role that devotion plays in the construction of cultural meaning and value could not comprehend why many devout Hindus, including those who once opposed hydroelectric development, would support it. Attention to *both* the impact of political decisions about resource management on the livelihoods of Himalayan residents *and* the religio-cultural meaning making that is inspired by the Ganga will move us beyond the development/conservation binary, Drew argues.

As the majority of her interlocutors were women, gender forms a key vector in Drew's analysis of development and conservation conflict. *River Dialogues* examines how women's participation in anti-dam activism emerges from the specific conditions of their lives and work in the Ganga River valley. Rejecting scholarship that naturalizes gendered experience and gendered meaning-making, Drew locates the transformation in women's subjectivities occasioned by participation in dam opposition movements in their everyday interactions with the divine river itself and in the practices of devotion that cultivate their relationship to it. Here she is attentive to the cultural specificity of cosmology and practice in Garhwal, whose departures from prevailing norms in the plains of India informs much of the politics around dams in the region, just as they have long informed Garhwali

subjectivities. In the singing of Garhwali devotional songs to the Ganga, in the regular act of bathing in her sometimes frigid waters, and in the substantial labor required to farm land in this valley, women develop distinctive ideas about the river and about dams. Despite her emphasis on the ethnographic present, Drew does not fail to remind us that these gendered perspectives are also conditioned by the distinct trajectories of Garhwali history. This historically informed analysis is seen, for example, in her discussions of activists' sometimes bitter reflections on the "tree-hugging" Chipko demonstrations of the late twentieth century that generated much outside interest but little local control over resources.

The book's narrative is framed by a set of dramatic events that have shaped how the public debates about hydroelectric development along the upper reaches of the Ganga have developed and shifted over the last decade. Following the completion of the massive Tehri dam further downriver, activist G. D. Agarwal launched the first of his three hunger strikes against the high-altitude projects in 2008. These Gandhian protests were watched nationally, sparking local sympathy as well as opposition in Garhwal. When the Indian government halted construction and declared the 100-kilometer stretch of the Bhagirathi from Gangotri to Uttarkashi an Ecologically Sensitive Zone in 2012, thereby prohibiting

dams there, the recognition that these decisions would impact development more generally in Garhwal led to a reconsideration of the issues by Garhwalis previously opposed to the dams. Catastrophic flooding caused by locally heavy rainfall in 2012 and 2013 again raised questions about the ecological viability of dams. Drew's long-term association with dam activists as these events shaped and reshaped the conflict enables her to sketch the controversy with sensitivity and nuance. Debates that flared at these turning points contributed to her own evolving position, eventually convincing her that development and resource decisions must be undertaken with the lives and livelihoods of local residents whom they impact most directly in mind.

*River Dialogues* issues a call to scholars who study resource conflict to attend to the meaning and value that religiocultural practice can assign to the natural world, and it routinely engages its scholarly audience on theoretical questions. The book is, however, accessible to others who might find its discussions of political economy in the Indian Himalayas or the hydrodevelopment of the Ganga River useful, including advanced undergraduates. With chapters divided into short sections and separated by narrative "interludes," the book is also replete with substantive accounts of Drew's fieldwork encounters and excerpts of interviews, giving the reader not only a sense for the words and passions of

her subjects but also the experience of the anthropologist. This latter is a particularly effective tool for unsettling the scholar's authority and disclosing her own shifting perspectives on development in sensitive Himalayan regions.

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