



# Why wouldn't we cry? Love and loss along a river in decline

Georgina Drew

Postdoctoral Fellow, India China Institute The New School, 66 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10011, USA

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 5 February 2011

Received in revised form

26 September 2011

Accepted 21 November 2011

### Keywords:

River Ganga

Emotion

Hindu religion

Development

Climate change

Policy

## ABSTRACT

Along the upper reaches of the Ganga in the Indian Himalayas, devotees of the river and its Hindu Goddess decry the changes that are effecting the sanctity and continuity of its flow. Concerns include the impacts of development projects such as hydroelectric dams and the implications of climate shifts such as altered precipitation, warming temperatures, and melting glaciers. These forces of change are frequent subjects of commentary for those that fear the river's potential demise. This article draws from ethnographic research from 2008 to 2009 to highlight two of the main emotions cited by river devotees when they speak of its condition: love and loss. The feelings of intimacy are sometimes expressed through talk of identity (*pehchaan*) and in demands to ensure the river's uninterrupted flow. Expressions of loss are also shared verbally, through discourse, and they are evident in moments when people respond to significant changes in the river's appearance. After addressing discourses of concern for the Ganga, the article closes with the Government of India's decision to cancel the contested dams on the river's upper regions and to declare it an "eco-sensitive zone". Such measures are important recognitions of emotive linkages with and dependencies on nature.

© 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

In a world dependent on water, it is no wonder that human relationships with the life-sustaining element are a prominent point of inquiry. Exploring "fluvial intimacies", for instance, [Raffles \(2002\)](#) eloquently described the personal ways that water bodies enter into histories, landscapes, and perceptions of self in the Amazon. Others, such as [Lansing \(1991\)](#), looked at how people have managed holy water features and the corresponding roles that those features have played in the configuration of social relationships. [Cruikshank \(2005\)](#), in her study of native Alaskan stories about glaciers, examined the memories and moments in which solid water bodies feature as actors (and fairly emotional ones at that) in social-natural landscapes. Addressing phenomena such as climate change, Susan [Crate \(2008\)](#) has explored the implications of melting tundra on the livelihoods and cosmologies of people living in places such as Siberia. Building on these engagements, this article addresses intimacy and emotion with a particular water body, the Ganga (Ganges River), which is experiencing significant transformations in the Himalayas. I argue that entities such as the Ganga are connected to senses of self and notions of place that inform human subjectivity. These non-material affects, as some of the scholars I noted pointed out, have tangible implications for the way that we organize our lives and respond to environmental challenges. In this article, I show how emotive

responses to development and climate change along the Ganga impact human behavior and policy.

The study of emotion is a complex field that spans numerous disciplines. Given the scope of interest in human emotion from biology to psychology and anthropology, among others, there are differences of opinion on the theories and methodologies that best approximate emotional phenomena and their significance. In a survey of work on religion and emotion, [Corrigan \(2004\)](#) points to these disparate approaches, some of which have ranged from the universalistic to the relativistic. The latter stance, which pushes against the idea that emotions are unconditioned phenomena, asserts that emotion is an aspect of cultural life formed by the navigation of persons through the various matrices of social relations that one encounters in the everyday and in the exceptional. The relativist approach makes the critical contribution of asserting that culture plays a foundational role in shaping our conceptions of acceptable and unacceptable emotions to external stimuli. And yet, as [Milton \(2002\)](#) reminds us, biology and socialization are not explanation enough when it comes to understanding the complexity of human emotion. This is particularly true when we examine human affect towards nature.

Drawing from [Ingold \(2000\)](#), Milton points out that it is crucial to address the role that direct experience with nature plays in shaping the knowledge we acquire and the corresponding meanings and values that we imbue nature with. In many instances around the world, the meanings that humans produce about natural entities include the attribution of personhood. This may

E-mail address: [georginadrew@gmail.com](mailto:georginadrew@gmail.com).

build upon cultural norms and it may also develop in our relationships with what she calls our “total environment” (2002: 47). This does not necessarily mean that people perceive the divine in nature—although many frequently do (as evidenced by cultural framings of Mother Nature or, as it is referred to in some Latin American contexts, *pachamama*)—but that they see *persons* there. These persons are intentional beings and/or beings of moral concern (ibid.: 33). For Milton an important point is that, whatever innate cognitive mechanisms we possess, and however they are used in perception, the domain of personhood is an experiential one. Meaningful experiences are produced by the many ways in which human and non-human things in the environment actively relate to us and the ways that we, in turn, actively engage with them with varying degrees of responsive relatedness (ibid.: 47–48). These are provocative arguments that bear light on the affective responses that people have to the manipulation and potential decline of the Ganga in the Indian Himalayas.

In speaking of the emotions that the river's treatment elicits, I recognize both the sociological importance of cultural and religious framings on its significance as a sacred Hindu Goddess in riverine form as well as the role that direct experience with the river has in informing concerns about its condition. This allows me to focus on the meanings produced about the river's transformations, which are accessible through discourse, by people who express faith in the Goddess Ganga and who espouse adoration for its waters. My approach in this article therefore includes attention to discourses and experiences in my attempts to highlight the emotions of love and loss. Discourse, in an influential conceptualization, includes the practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak (Foucault, 1972: 49). Lutz and Abu-Lughod (1990) use this definition to argue that discourse is a useful means to explore emotion, which they recognize to be meaningful sentiments that are also a part of everyday politics. When interjected into social life and power struggles, emotions can serve as “pragmatic acts and communicative performances” (Lutz and Abu-Lughod, 1990: 11).

## 2. The sociological significance of the Ganga and its manipulation

Contemporary practices of reverence for the Ganga and its Goddess have historic precedence. The river's cultural and religious importance extends far back into India's history, perhaps even millennia, as epics such as the *Ramayana* (Valmiki N.D. (2000)) and the *Mahabharata* (Narasimhan, 1998) attest. Although numerous rivers are worshiped across South Asia, the Ganga is an especially prominent icon of human devotion to nature. Many millions of people gather along its banks every year to ritually bathe in its spiritually purifying waters. Some of these practices are prescribed acts that take place on auspicious days in the Hindu calendar or on particularly momentous days such as a wedding, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. Others are informal, intimate practices of reverence to the river that people enact daily through impromptu visits to its banks or in the Ganga's remembrance and invocation in times of prayer.

Despite these practices of devotion, the river faces significant physical challenges due to urbanization, pollution, and mismanagement, which have been well documented in the Indian plains (Alley, 2002). A growing area of concern and commentary is on the Ganga's condition in the Himalayas where development projects and climatic change are effecting visible changes in the quality and quantity of its flow. This article focuses on a particular stretch of the river in the Himalayas called the Bhagirathi Ganga that is referred to simply as “Ganga” in the region through which it flows. The tributary originates from a glacial source called “Gaumukh” that is upheld as a sacred site or *tirtha*. People come from all over the

world to pay homage to Ganga at the glacier and at a prominent temple 21 km downstream at Gangotri that houses an embodiment of the Goddess.

The Bhagirathi Ganga is a modest stream at many times of the year. When the summer rains of the monsoon arrive, however, this river is flushed—even flooded—with heavy and corrosive flows. After the river travels downstream from Gaumukh and Gangotri, numerous other tributaries contribute to its flow. Engineers estimate that parts of the river located under 3000 m in elevation could facilitate the production of 350–600 megawatts (MW) of electricity at various locations. To tap into this power and to feed the high growth of India's energy-hungry economy, numerous projects were in various stages of construction from 2006 to 2010. These dams were highly contested despite the presence of existing dams on the river. A modest 90-MW dam, for instance, was earlier constructed at Maneri in the district of Uttarkashi where the new dams were being built. Despite this, opponents critiqued the new projects by pointing out the increase in water scarcity, the presence of heavy silt loads that can cut the Maneri dam's electricity production in half, and the need to conserve the increasingly fragile ecologies of the Himalayas. Many of the dam opponents also decried the cultural and religious implications of dam building practices that redirect sacred Hindu waters. I have written about the specifics of such preoccupations elsewhere while highlighting the social movements that the dams inspired (Drew, 2011, *in press*). For this paper, I want to focus on the emotive responses to dam projects and the impacts of ecological shifts, some of which are linked with climate change. In particular, I highlight two of the main emotions cited by respondents in and around the vicinity of Uttarkashi where I conducted 12 months of ethnographic research in 2008 and 2009 (with an additional four months of research on activist and organizational networks in urban areas such as New Delhi). These emotions are love and loss.<sup>1</sup>

Why, one could ask, would I choose to focus on emotive responses to dams, development, and climate change? What could such a task possibly accomplish? These questions merit responses. First, my ethnographic work was originally designed to understand people's knowledge of, and responses to, ecological change along the Himalayan reaches of the sacred Ganga. What I found, in addition to the knowledge of environmental shifts that people expressed, was a repeated desire on the part of Himalayan residents to share their affective reactions to transformations in the mountains. In environmental campaigns and religious ceremonies, women cried when speaking of their devotion to the Ganga (and the Bhagirathi Ganga in particular) and their fears for its tentative condition. In dam-affected areas along the river's Himalayan course, people looked glumly over hills laid barren from dam construction and at the thin trickle of water in the riverbed to convey the sorrow that these sights inspired. In expressing these sentiments, some respondents lamented that people had lost respect for this most important of river Goddesses. They also pondered what the river's loss would mean for their daily practices. Who would they turn to for solace, they asked, and where would they perform the rituals that are so dependent on accessing the Ganga's running and purifying waters? These emotions seemed to indicate that, for some devotees, the transformation of the mountains and of the Ganga had the potential to cause cosmological and ontological ruptures with real implications for the practices that they valued. When contemplating these arguments and the powerful

<sup>1</sup> I also share moments of anger in this article. Those sentiments, however, are often specifically targeted towards development projects. Since I endeavor to highlight the source emotion that triggers indignation (which I convey in the terms given by my consultants as connection to and love for the Ganga) along with the feelings that the river's transformation due to development and climate change evokes (which I interpret as loss), I omit a focus on anger for the time being.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/946810>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/946810>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)