

From the Mouth of the River

by

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“They both listened silently to the water, which to them was not just water, but the voice of life, the voice of Being, the voice of perpetual Becoming.”

– Herman Hesse, Siddhartha

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Prologue

On the Saptakoshi River in Southeastern Nepal, the imminent construction of a hydropower dam fits the conventional narrative of ‘progress’ for parts of the country but would mean loss for local communities. In April of 2014, I had the opportunity to travel to some of the riverside villages that will be affected by the dam. During my month-long stay in these communities, I collected the stories of many community members, indigenous peoples, and self-proclaimed anti-dam activists who live by the river. While there, I had the privilege of listening to the passion, desperation, and strength of those who are coming together to defend their existence.

The Nepali and Indian governments first conceived of the idea of a multipurpose high dam in 1953 as a means of controlling the annual floods plaguing the downstream state of Bihar, India. In addition to flood control, the dam project was envisioned to generate hydropower and irrigation for the two countries. Due to high costs, the proposal was dropped, and instead the Indian government chose to build a series of embankments and barrages, or flood control sluices, along the river, with a total of 52 sluice gates controlled by Indian officers. However, after the eastern embankments breached in 2008—which submerged several districts in Nepal and India, killed hundreds, and displaced millions of people—the dam proposal re-entered discussion¹.

The Indian government has proposed the construction of this multipurpose high dam on the Saptakoshi River in the Sunsari district of Nepal, two kilometres

¹ Dixit, Ajaya. “Kosi Embankment Breach in Nepal: Need for a Paradigm Shift in Responding to Floods.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7 (2009), p.76.

upstream of the Barakhshetra temple and Hindu pilgrimage site. According to the Indian planning committee, this 269 meter-high (882.5 feet) dam would provide 3300 MW of electricity and irrigate 1.2 million hectares of land in both India and Nepal, while also controlling the floods in Bihar.² And yet, if constructed, the dam would also displace thousands of people in over 80 Village Development Committees (VDCs), or more than 300 villages³, from the regions above the dam site down into India, destroying homes, culture, land, and a way of life. Given these circumstances, the project has been met with opposition from surrounding communities, and the construction of the dam has been postponed for 14 years. After the floods of 2008, efforts to restart the dam planning and construction began, with the Indian government and the Saptakoshi Joint Commissions Offices sending representatives into the villages to conduct Detailed Project Report (DPR) surveys assessing the potential impacts of the high dam. However, there has been a strong objection to the DPR representatives in these communities, and many people have chosen to withhold information, refused to speak with them, and caused disturbances to their work. While the Indian and Nepali governments are promising benefits to Nepali citizens, many local people along the Koshi Basin are choosing to resist the dam project in an effort to preserve their cultures, environment, and homes.

To the government officials behind the project, the dam is a symbol of development and progress in a nation of untapped resources. To the people of the

² Shaurabh. "Issue Brief: Re-examining the Indo-Nepal Saptakoshi Dam Project." Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi (2012).

³ Khatiwada, S.P. "River, Culture, and Water Issue: An Overview of Saptakoshi High Dam Project of Nepal." *Anthropology* 2:130 (2014).

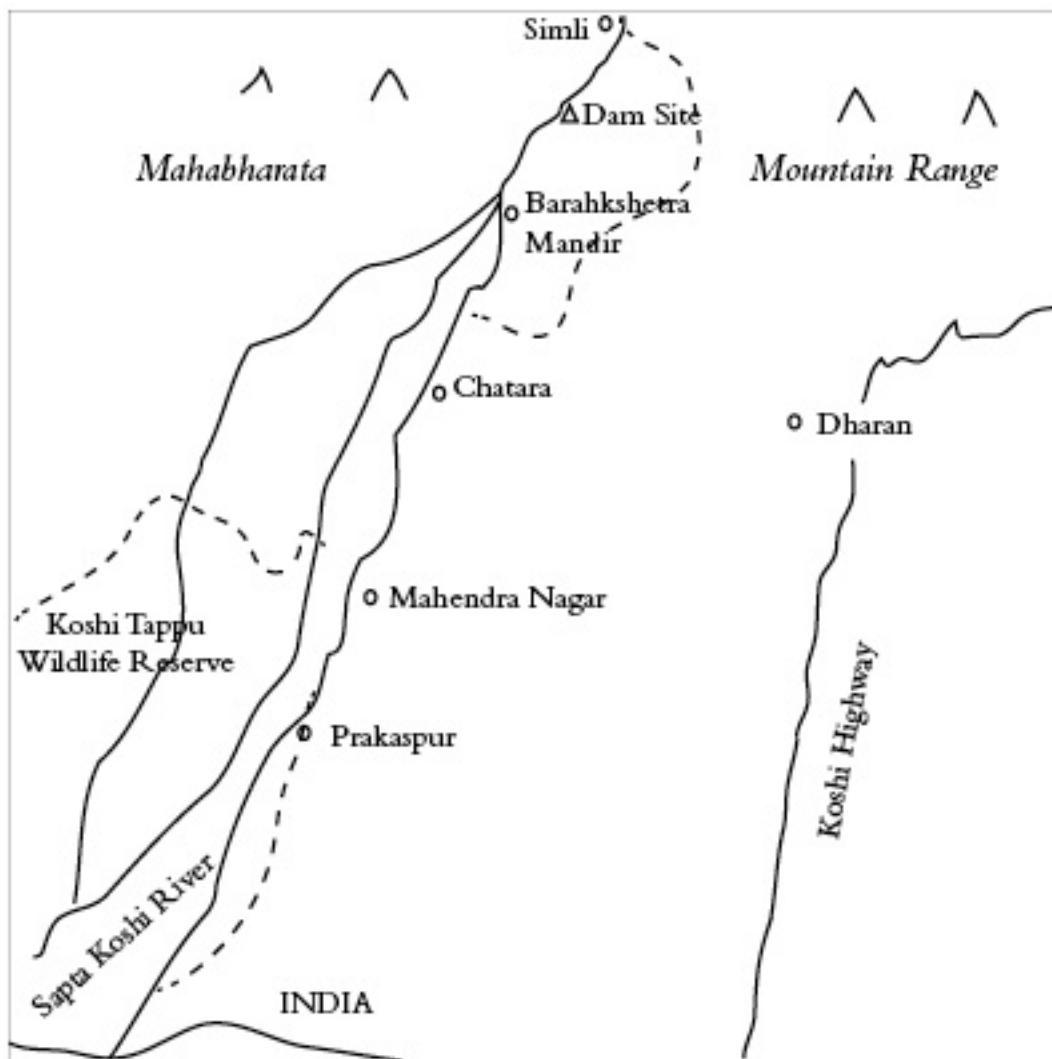
Saptakoshi River, the dam represents displacement from ancestral land, loss of culture and tradition, destruction of religious sites, and the desecration of a sacred river. It represents fear—of flooding, landslides, forced resettlement, and disaster, as the dam will be built on an immature hillside in a high-earthquake zone. It represents the loss of a way of life that has revolved around the river for generations. These communities do not necessarily believe that *bikas* (development) is inherently negative: what separates this dam conflict from the many before it is that the people are willing to consider the development of their lands as long as they are involved, and their lives, needs, and priorities are considered, throughout. And yet, it is their lack of agency in the decision-making process and the government officials' neglect of local needs and perspectives that is central to their resistance.

This is why, in the riverside villages, far from the project 'experts' and government offices, community members are joining together to resist the project and demand that their voices be included in discussion. Included in this book are just some of these voices, a handful of oral stories collected from those who live by the sacred Koshi.

My approach has been to weave these stories together into a work of narrative non-fiction that is both creative in its presentation and journalistic in its factual accuracy. I chose to craft my research into this style as a means of revealing the human side of the issue, to allow the readers to get to know the characters as I did, and to build an understanding by exposing their truths. The voices in this thesis have been excluded and ignored by the dam project developers, and it was therefore my intent to create a space for them.

With a few exceptions, all of the interviews in this thesis are my own translations from Nepali, with the help of my teachers and friends in Nepal. Some names have been changed to respect the wishes of individuals. A list of all of the interview subjects can be found at the end of this thesis.

It is my hope that this collection of stories will break away from the popular narrative of “tradition versus progress” that often dominates the discourse surrounding large-scale development projects. I hope instead to reveal the complexity of the issue, the muddiness that I’m still wading through as I struggle to understand it, and to show the human stories that are so often lost in the hands of international agencies and government offices—to give power to these voices. Change has not been unwelcome in these communities—they are not untouched by globalization, nor is their river pristine and unpolluted. And still, there is a difference: here is a people that is so rooted in the landscape, so intertwined with the natural surroundings, that it has become a part of their culture, beliefs, and everyday lives. The roots are so deep that to take the people out of the place, or to change the place itself, would also change the people. I invite you to listen to their stories.



KOSHI BASIN, NEPAL

Millions of years ago, in the heavenly planets, the *devas* (demigods) and *asuras* (demons) were battling for supremacy and power. The demigods had lost all of their strength due to a curse, and so they approached Lord Vishnu, the great protector of the universe, for help. Lord Vishnu instructed them to work together with the demons to churn the ocean of milk and produce the nectar of immortality, and made them promise to share the treasure equally after. As they churned the ocean, a *kumbh* (urn) filled to the brim with immortal nectar emerged. At the sight of the urn, the demons and demigods began to fight, lasting for twelve days and twelve nights, or the equivalent of twelve human years. While the demigods, with the help of Lord Vishnu, ultimately obtained the pot of nectar, it is believed that during the battle, several drops of nectar spilled onto the earth, into the rivers. These places are considered to be the most sacred sites for Hindus, and bathing in them is said to cleanse, purify, and rejuvenate the worshipper, just as the nectar of life would.

One of these places is the Saptakoshi River.

- *Sagar Manthan, or Churning of the Ocean of Milk*,
adapted from the *Bhagavata Purana* text of Hinduism

The Inhabited Koshi: *Stories of Displacement*

“Nowadays we are owners of our land, but if we are displaced, we will be landless people.” –Mohan Rai, Dhankuta district.

Barakhshetra *mandir* (temple), morning. It is April, the air thick with the heat of the mid-morning sun in the Eastern Hills of Nepal. I am standing in the centre of the temple courtyard, lightheaded from the feverish season and the swirling bodies and the flames that leap from raised metal platforms. The white doors of the temple are swollen and peeling as women in red saris and men in canvas hats bend over fires, eyes shut in prayer. Children push past, hands brimming with orange and pink flower petals to offer to the river that flows below. The air is stifling, thick with smoke and incense, and a deep voice chants prayers over a loudspeaker. A group of people crowds around a set of bells decorated with red and white *tikkaa* (powder), but the sound is lost. People carry tin plates of uncooked rice, flowers, leaves, and coloured threads down the steep stairs to the riverbank, slippered feet slapping against the stones. The distant figures of sari-clad women squatting by the river’s edge are made hazy with the dust. Sun-worn palms cup handfuls of clear water, raising it to foreheads, eyes, lips. The *puja* (worship) is a physical ritual, each grain and petal laden with spiritual significance. Remnants of *puja* drift with the current and collect by the shore—foaming pools of rice and petals, glimmers of colour against dark wet stones.

The narrow village path is lined with tall black cooking vats, and I watch as shop owners fry bread and chickpeas, the smell thickening the air and the crackle of spitting oil drawing me into shop-front homes. It is *Kumbha Melaa* (urn festival), a

mass Hindu pilgrimage in which people of faith come for ritual bathing in the sacred river, and one of the most ancient festivals in the world. The festival rotates between the most sacred river sites in India and Nepal where, according to Hindu scripture, the nectar of immortality spilled as the demons and demigods fought. This is the first time in twelve years that it is happening on the banks of the Saptakoshi River.

Devotees, feet sheathed in dirt and backs bent in the sun, climb the narrow gravel road cut into the mountain, handkerchiefs clamped over noses to block out the dust, moving step after step towards the temple and river. Old buses with mud-caked tires halt by the mouth of the village, and hundreds of people tumble out to begin their descent. This is pilgrimage.

The first house of the village is painted maroon and white with clay. Woven stools and benches line the outside, clustered together. A group of young people are crowded in a circle, watching the dusty and bewildered pilgrims enter the village. Among them is a woman, the haze of sun gleaming on her hairline, picking up the light of the large stud in her left nostril, eyes wide and intense, a red dot pressed in between her eyebrows—a marker of marriage. I sit on the bench beside her. Perched on a stool, she speaks to me over a souvenir frame that she is crafting, her hands continually working the wood throughout our conversation. She tells me her name is Durga Pariyar, that she is in her twenties, that she has always lived here.

“There is no benefit for us because the dam will not directly help us. People in other areas may benefit, but we will only get a new road and improved movement of people. Blocking the river waters may work for a short time, but the nature of this water is to flood, so eventually with time it will explode or flood. If it does, it will

create a very critical situation and it may be one of the most dangerous disasters in the world, and will bring more harm than good. The experts working on the dam and even those leading the movements against it are not listening to the female perspective. They are all men and they say they are masters of the issue, but I don't know if they are masters or not.” She smiles at me, eyes glimmering, and brushes the wood shavings from her lap. I watch as they settle over our feet, mingling with the red dust, as she continues,

“The older generation spent their whole life here. They lived 70, 80, even 90 years here and they want to die in this place. If the government starts to displace people, they won't want to go because they are attached to this natural area. If the government forcefully shifts them to a new settlement area, that may be a new cause of their death. The government should think of this and not do the project. If the dam explodes and the reserve water sweeps this area all the way to Jhapa⁴, it will become a desert and many people will lose their lives. In such a situation, will India provide a new settlement area for all of the displaced people? I don't think they will. So this is harmful for Nepal.”

I walked away contemplating the idea of an ancestral home. It is a concept unknown to me—and to many others who come from immigrant families and were raised away from their origins. And yet, here was a woman close to my age, speaking of the generations before her, showing me how her roots in this land extend back to

⁴ Jhapa is the easternmost district of Nepal.

before she was even born. What happens when a community so engrained in a place is removed? Durga had given me one answer; I was anxious for more.

High above, a suspension bridge connects this village to the higher hills, the metal grates shuddering as people step across. The words “1.6 km to dam site” are painted on a nearby rock. Across the bridge, an elderly woman sits outside her stall selling orange jugs and small paper packets of *tikkaa* to passersby. She crouches on the ground and winds the loose end of her sari around her shoulder. She will not tell me her name at first, and upon my insistence she tells me to walk across the bridge and ask her son. I find him later that morning, and he tells me her name is Chatara Maya. When I crouch on the ground beside her, she drags a broken wooden pallet from beneath her stall for me to sit on. Our conversation is long, peppered by customers asking about this bracelet or that powder, negotiating prices and sharing news of their children. She is surprisingly agile given her hunched stature and curled toes, springing up from the ground every few minutes to tend to a customer with an ease that betrays the soft folds of skin on her cheeks. The first question I ask her is whether she lives here. The first thing she tells me is that she always has.

“We have been living here since the time of our birth. We are familiar with the nature, the environment here, and we know everything in this area. If they build a high dam then we will be displaced from here, and if we go somewhere else then our daily lifestyle and practices will be new. We cannot exist as we do here. From an environmental, social, and cultural perspective, it will be hard to adjust to a new environment. This does not compare with compensation.

“Always, I am afraid of displacement if the dam is built in this area. We don’t have another place to go, we don’t have land elsewhere, we don’t have enough money or property. It would be better for them not to build the dam. Landlords and rich people can easily settle somewhere else if they are displaced, but we are poor here, so we cannot easily do this.” She raises her arms to motion around her, and I notice how the starched cotton of her sari blouse cuts into her upper arm, the wrinkled flesh blooming around her sleeve like a mottled flower.

“In this area we spend our lives with difficulty, and yet, easily, so it isn’t certain whether or not life will be easier and more sophisticated if we are displaced. This place is what we know. We earn money to live our lives by owning a small shop, but we won’t have this opportunity in a new settlement area. I am happy running this small shop and earning a little money to support sending my nephew to school and to support my family in daily life.

“Through hard work and labour we have collected some small pieces of land here, we broke stones and built our home, we have earned a little money by running this shop. Everyone knows me here and I am happy here with them. This is my small happy world and I won’t be happy if they shift us from here. Like this it will be sad, like this. I cannot say anything for or against the dam. If my sons and neighbours support it, then I cannot go against them alone, but if they don’t support it, then I also cannot go against them.”

I climb higher into the hills on a path just barely the width of my own body cut into the rock, snaking away from the river that froths below. At times I find

myself gripping the smooth cliffside as I inch along its edge; at other times, the path opens up into a gravelly plateau, and I am able to pause for a moment with both feet planted in the dust to gaze over the edge at the mass of greyish-green water that eases into a pale jade colour near the riverbanks. At one point, perhaps from the heat, I find the path blocked by a thin strip of fire, its golden tongue spitting charred stones and blackened branches over the cliff's edge, and in a running leap I launch myself over the flames, scraping my palms as I collide with the rock face on the other side. To me, this is all fantastically unfamiliar. I have to remind myself that, to many, this is home.

The pathway turns inland, and I see houses clustered along the hills, dirt floors packed smooth to a polish, stripes of chalky paint laid thickly over the walls. Here and there, a chicken, a pig, mud drying grey on its snout. I look around and notice a middle-aged man with a long red mark painted on his forehead and a chunky silver watch strapped around his wrist sitting outside a house, whose front has been converted into a shop. Set against a faded bed sheet printed with roses are dusty plastic tubs of assorted sweets, betelnut mouth fresheners, brown cakes of soap stacked into pyramids, dewy and soft in the afternoon sun. I unroll a few rupee notes and purchase an individually wrapped cube of gum that bursts into juice when I chew it. He laughs at my reaction, and I notice that his teeth are small like a child's, his cheeks round and full. I seize this moment of warmth and introduce myself, asking him if he would talk to me for a while. He spreads his arms wide, grinning, and clears a space for me on the table, telling me that his name is Sir Mukhya.

“All the people of the Koshi corridor, from the highway to Chatara, will be displaced because the raw materials for the dam brought over from Calcutta [India]

will be stored in the *Terai* (plains) region and carried slowly up to the construction area. For this they may need a very big area in the villages of Mahendra Nagar and Prakaspur, so those people will also be displaced, and this will cause a great problem for settlement. I don't think resettlement will be possible in this case because politics are unstable right now and the treaties have not been clearly formed.

“I know only this much about the high dam: if you had been living there your whole life and I told you to move, would you want to? What would you say?”

His voice wavers, but in his eyes I see frustration, anger. A dark cloud roiling behind his baby face. He leans back against the lacy bed sheet covering the walls of the home that he may soon be forced to leave.

The Saptakoshi Multipurpose High Dam is not the first of its kind. Rather, it follows in a long line of water projects built on Nepal's rivers by the Indian government based on water treaties between the two countries⁵. These treaties are an attempt by countries with greater technological and financial resources, like India and China, to tap into the wealth of freshwater and vast hydroelectric potential of Nepal. However, the fact that Nepal doesn't have the resources required to develop these projects alone results in a dynamic in which the Indian government wields disproportionate power in the decision-making process, resulting in the marginalization of the interests and rights of the very communities that will be most affected by the project. This imbalance leads to what many of the community

⁵ For example, in 1996 the Mahakali Treaty was signed by both governments to produce hydropower and irrigation for India and Nepal through the Pancheshwar Project. However, the treaty specified that Nepal would get 4 percent of the water supply without specifying India's share, thus allowing India to reap greater benefits. (Gyawali and Dixit, 1999).

residents referred to as “failed water treaties”—treaties between the two countries that, while promising progress for Nepal, in reality disregarded the local perspectives, failing to deliver the benefits to these communities while burdening them with the gravest consequences.

I learned much of this history through the stories of Kamal Bahadur Katwal and Devi Maya Khardka, both victims of the Koshi Barrage flood in 2008 and current residents of Mahendra Nagar village, downstream of the dam site. The Koshi Barrage, which was the precursor to the Saptakoshi High Dam, was a series of sluices and embankments built and operated by India to control flooding downstream that breached and collapsed, displacing millions of people and forcing them to move into settlements⁶. This is where I met Kamal and Devi: at the place that they built for themselves after losing their homes to the flood.

The settlement area is long and narrow, lush with trees and bushes whose wide flat leaves shimmer in the humid air. As I approach Kamal’s house, a balding kitten licks at the dust on my feet. To my left is a water pump—three short walls of concrete from which protrude a long metal lever that gurgles out a clear trickle of water when pushed down. Fields of chest-high corn and rice paddies glow a murky green to my right. A cow tied to a nearby tree groans drowsily. A few steps beyond here is the house: a long hut with smooth clay walls and thick tree trunks supporting the thatched roof. Patterns of white squares and stripes have been painted onto the wood, and strips of pink and red cloth hang from nails driven into the trunks.

⁶ The embankment breach was not a rare occurrence: according to Nepali water expert Ajaya Dixit, breaches are “an inherent feature of any flood control embankment system, and the August 2008 event was actually the eighth major breach since the embankments were completed in 1959.” (Dixit 2009, 77.)

Attached to the house is an open stable with straw-lined floors and sunlight filtering in through the latticed wood overhead. Burlap bags overfilled with grains weigh down the shelves nailed to the back wall and a ladder leans against one of the tree-trunk pillars, leading up to the roof. A calendar tacked to the wall that follows the *Bikram Sambat* (BS) Nepali months is open to a page printed with the face of an unsmiling man in a collar and tie. Above his picture, black letters read ‘BAISAKH 2071’ –the equivalent of April 2014 in the Western calendar.

There is a low table covered in a flowery pink and black cloth in the stable, and it is here that I sit with Kamal for the better part of the day while he recounts his experience with the flood, his struggles with displacement and building a new settlement, his fight for compensation that has not yet come seven years later, his knowledge of all of the failed water treaties of the past and his premonition that this one will be the same. Cross-legged, dressed in navy blue slacks and an unbuttoned plaid shirt with grey hair peeking out from beneath his printed *topi* (Nepali hat), the words flow from him in a constant stream that is interrupted only by the entrance of his family, neighbours, and surrounding farmers, who gather around to listen as the conversation continues. “At 11pm the Koshi entered the village at night. At that time it was dark and people couldn’t go anywhere, take their animals or belongings. The water level came up to six feet and people went to their roofs, but the flood swept the farms and animals and most of them died. Sand spread over the ground, under our homes,” he begins. His eyes are wide, and he closes them for a moment, a crease forming between his eyebrows. I imagine that he is reliving that night—the water, all

of the water. When he opens his eyes, his face is calm and still. Then, without pause, he says,

“The Koshi Barrage raised the water level and caused it to change its course. In 2019 BS⁷, the Indian government blocked the gates of the Barrage and the floods came and displaced many people here. In 2025 BS⁸ as well, the Indian government shut down the gates, and after that four days of continuous rain fell and the water level went up and flooded the village. People then reported to the police, the police informed Kathmandu, Kathmandu informed Delhi, and then the Indian government ordered the gates to be opened. Only then did the people have relief.

“After some time the Koshi returned to its way. In 2037 BS⁹ again the Koshi entered the village and the main flow of water came here and entered this place. At that time an Indian government contractor had built a dam to block the riverbank and make the water return to the river. But the dam construction was actually wrong—they made it too long—and they made people afraid by saying that if we raised our voices against the Indian government we might go to court and the police would arrest us. So we couldn’t take action at that time. In between 2037 and 2043 BS¹⁰, this area was destroyed by the Koshi due to the small dam that changed the course of the water.”

⁷ 1963 A.D.: the first breach of the Koshi Barrage, blamed on animals for digging holes in the embankment

⁸ 1968 A.D.: the second breach of the Koshi embankment

⁹ 1980 A.D.: the fourth breach of the Koshi embankment

¹⁰ 1980-1985 A.D.: more embankment breaches that displaced hundreds of thousands of people in two districts

A young girl emerges from the house carrying a tray with several tall glasses of a neon-orange juice. She offers me a glass and, when I accept, whispers timidly that I should stir it because the juice powder has settled to the bottom. Having handed out all the glasses, she settles down to sit beside her father, her legs dangling over the side of the table, barely brushing the floor. As we drink, I guess at her age and calculate that she must have been only five or six when the flood struck. There is little air in the stable and I drink gratefully. In a minute, Kamal drains his glass and waves at the pen and notebook in my lap, indicating that he would like to resume his story.

“Another issue with the Koshi Barrage was that all the rights to operate it were preserved by India even though it’s in Nepal. The Indian government dominates Nepal. If they construct the Saptakoshi Dam, we can guess that most of the rights will go to India and the Nepali people will be exploited. We have raised such questions in several meetings, even in Indo-Nepal activist meetings, but they just listened and didn’t give their decision. The Indian government may bring their army to the dam area so that the Nepali people can’t go there.

“We are worried about the construction of the dam. If it explodes, people of our districts may lose their lives. More districts will also be destroyed in Bihar, India. 13 trillion m³ of water will be stored above the dam, which will destroy all the settlements on the riverside. We will lose all of our natural area. Our fertile land here will be destroyed... plants, trees, forests, medicinal plants, animals, reptiles, fish, insects. When the dam is built, the water will fall from almost 300 metres down and flood us. If the water storage breaks because of wind, it will destroy the settlements in the hill area. There are many small hills and the wind makes the water move, so there

will be landslides and the water level will rise over the riverbed. The dam may explode under pressure, so it will always be dangerous for the people in the corridor. There are several natural springs in the ground, but if it is built the mud will block the springs and our water resources will be blocked above the dam. Below the dam, the water will dry and life will be in crisis. This settlement area may become a desert. Our demand up to now is not to make the dam that will destroy all of these things.”

A thin elderly woman enters through the back of the stable and stands beside me. Her skin is dark and beautiful, her grey hair pulled back into a knot at the nape of her neck. She wears a sky blue sari blouse with a patterned yellow skirt and a snowy shawl draped across her chest. On each wrist she wears a bangle, one blue, the other red. She places a finger on my shoulder and I notice that her hands are dusty and calloused with work. Kamal introduces her as Devi Maya Khardka and says that I should speak with her now because she has just come from working on the farm and has to return soon. I suddenly realize that this whole afternoon I have probably been imposing on an otherwise full workday in a family that is working twice as hard to sustain themselves after losing their livelihood. “Only if you have time,” I say, “I don’t want to...” Devi shakes her head. “I can speak with you,” she says, “but let us speak now, because I am a farmer and we women are always busy.”

She sits beside me and I begin with a question about the river. For a moment she says nothing, perhaps thinking, perhaps trying to decipher my accent, and in that moment Kamal begins to speak. “Women don’t know much about this,” he says. I look at him. “Hold on,” I say. “I want to hear what she has to say.”

Devi pulls her shawl over her hair, looks up, and begins.

“A large volume of water flows in the river and if they construct the dam, the water might sweep us away. I cannot say what the effects will be but we are afraid of the dam, and it would be better not to construct it. People say, if they build the dam our lives will be in danger. These days we are focused on the Koshi floods and its effects on this area, so we have formed ten committees to get compensation from the flood damage. The Koshi has run over our lands, it changed its course and is on our land now, it came close to Sunsari and destroyed our fertile lands. We did not get compensation after losing our land. I lost 1 *bigha* (a measurement of land equivalent to 6,772.63 m²) land to the river, and all the people of that area had the same problem.

“The government should replace our land. We want land in another area that is as fertile as ours was. We lost our domestic animals in the flood, we lost our home, our properties, but got none back. Our demand is to have land and some amount of money and compensation for livestock and property. The dam may destroy our homes. We may lose our livestock and personal gardens, community forests and crops in our field. We are afraid of the dam because we are already victims of the flood.

“We [women] have to spend our lives in hard work. If we do not work, we cannot eat morning or night. But we lost our land in the flood; this is a new settlement and we have a small piece of land now. Women do the hard work, and we have the pressure to make this work.

“This is a very small place where we have settled now. Before, we had a lot of land where we could produce crops and life was easy. It would have been better to

stay in the big field and we feel congested here. But we lost our land in the flood and there is no alternative. We had nowhere else to settle. That's why we're demanding compensation.”

As she comes to a close, I notice that we are surrounded. Kamal, his wife, their three daughters, his brother, and several others sit around the stable, silent as they listen to Devi speak.

I sit outside Kamal's house that evening, using the last shreds of sunlight to read my book¹¹ about past dam conflicts across the world. I am reading about the Narmada Dam in India—a project that garnered such strong resistance from local communities that it has been called the most controversial dam project in history. “Development, Not Displacement” was one of the slogans of that resistance movement. I think of that now, resting outside the settlement that I too will be calling home for the night. Development, displacement—these two things do not have to go together. But in the global South, big dams have come to be synonymous with national progress, as if building a several hundred-foot structure on a river is essentially building the nation itself. This comes at a time when the dam industry in North America has finally recognized its history of destruction; when, after years of damming up rivers while telling romantic stories of all the good that will arise from the stagnant waters and ugly concrete reservoirs, they are finally admitting their faults. Big dams are being de-commissioned and destroyed here. We now know that they cause major floods, spur on earthquakes, wash away the surrounding land while

¹¹ “Deep Water: the Epic Struggle Over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment” by Jacques Leslie (2005).

sentencing plants and animals to death. They unabashedly redistribute water and land from the poor, and often indigenous, to the richer. They flood out the upstream areas so that whole communities of people are displaced, while downstream they redirect the water flow, taking away irrigation from farms, degrading the land. And despite the promise of ‘permanence,’ once their biggest selling point, we know now that these dams are temporary—that big dams last only until they are blocked by sediment, unless of course, something causes them to breach and the water breaks through first. Dam failure can be caused by anything from poor maintenance to heavy rains—upwards of 70 dams have failed in the last 100 years¹². And still, despite what we now know through seeing time and time again the horrors of big dams, we’re still building them—only this time, we call them ‘Development aid’ in poorer countries with colonial pasts¹³. While I refuse to blame these countries for striving for national progress, I still find myself asking: what about the millions of people that make up these nations who are sacrificed on its path?

¹² According to a report from 2014 by the U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Reclamation entitled “Reclamation Consequence Estimating Methodology: Dam Failure and Flood Event Case History Compilation.”

¹³ Roy, Arundhati. “The Greater Common Good.” *Outlook India* (1999).

Field Notes from April 17th, Mahendra Nagar

We sat down in his small mud home in Mahendra Nagar. Kamal Bahadur wore a *topi* and sat cross-legged on a bench. His daughter, wife, and several other people gather around as well. Flies surrounded us—it was hot and the sun was beating down. Beside where we sat, goats grazed. I asked him one question, and he started speaking without stopping for 1.5 hours—he only needed a starting point and then he was off, speaking with passion. He spoke mostly about other water agreements and projects with India and about the 2008 flood that destroyed his land and home and forced him to move to this settlement. It is clear from his words that there is a collective trauma from these events that make these people distrust the Indian and Nepali governments and the high dam project. They are living in fear because of what they've already experienced and believe that it will happen again. They have no faith that compensation will be given because of all the previous promises of compensation that were broken. They are still hurting from the impact of being relocated. During the conversation, one of the daughters brought us glasses of juice and brought around a jug to refill.

Later, Devi Khardka comes in from working and sits on the bench outside with me. She wears a worn sari and a scarf wrapped around her head. She is thin and old, with grey hair and kind eyes. When I ask questions, she takes a moment before answering, thinking. In this moment the men sitting nearby try to intervene and speak over her, and I have to firmly tell them that I want to speak with her first, and then them. During the interview she says that older women are not very aware about the high dam project and are more focused on the effects of the flood, so I try to focus my questions on this. She too is clearly suffering from the memory of the flood and still dealing with its effects. She makes an interesting point that women will be affected differently because they are expected to do the agriculture work and provide for the family—without water, their job is made harder. After the interview she sits and listens for a while as I talk to the men, but then leaves to go back to work.

The Sacred Koshi: *Stories of Religion and Ritual*

“We pray to Koshi as our goddess. There are two ways to pray: one is to put flowers in the river, the other is to sacrifice goat and buffalo, and pray to the river to have a good life and to relieve our problems.” – Kamal Bahadur Katwal, Mahendra Nagar

Sakela is the biggest festival of the Kirat Rai people, an indigenous group who live in the Eastern Hills of Nepal. In the Kirat religion, there are numerous rituals having to do with nature, the harvest, and ancestors. *Sakela* is celebrated twice a year: during *Udhauli* (downward), the harvest season when the birds migrate down towards the warmer plains, and *Ubhauri* (upward), the planting season when the birds migrate up into the cooler hills. The festival is to worship nature: to pray for a healthy season of crops and to give thanks for the harvest.

The ritual is performed near the Koshi River, on the full moon day of each of the two seasons. Once gathered by the riverside, the people begin the *chula puja* (kitchen worship) to celebrate the source of food and life. Next, the Kirat religious leader sacrifices a hen in a sacred place, usually beneath a tree or by the water's edge. He then begins to dance, signaling the end of the ritual, and everyone joins, following the beat of the drums. The dance is a reflection of human life that is sustained by nature.

The weather is static. With scarcely a cloud in the sky, sunshine pools on every surface, the air heavy, condensing and dripping down backs. Village residents and visitors alike sit in the shade of trees and tea stalls, seeking relief from the pre-monsoon heat. A man and two women squat in the shadow of a cloth awning, the

women's wrists flicking back and forth as they pick out the stones from flat baskets of orange lentils. I approach the awning and try to begin a conversation, squatting down in the shade beside them. I ask, after a few moments, if they could talk to me about the Saptakoshi Multipurpose High Dam. "No," the older woman says, "can't you see we're busy working?" I turn to the man, open my mouth to ask. "We don't know anything about the high dam," he says, "and we don't want to talk about it." His tone is curt, his voice slightly raised. I apologize three times and walk away.

The heat soon becomes unbearable, and like many others around me, I am seeking relief. It is in the shade of a tea stall, pressing a cold Mountain Dew bottle against my cheeks, that I meet Ranabattrā Rai, a resident of Barahkshetra and a follower of the Kirat religion. He wears a t-shirt printed with a cartoon panda and a red and gold *puja* thread knotted around his neck. He sits on a wooden bench with two other men, all of who are drinking hot tea from tin cups. When I approach, he shifts over on the bench and calls for his wife, who is shelling a small mountain of peas, to bring me tea. He motions around the room, and I notice the dirt floors, the sacks of potatoes leaning against the walls, the painted jars of rice and lentils lining the shelves above, the packets of spiced nuts and Lays chips hanging in long strings from hooks by the entrance. He tells me that he spends many hours here, sitting with friends, helping his wife prepare food and tea for customers. Over the last week, I too had spent many hours here, hoping to meet locals who lived by the river or pilgrims traveling to and from Barahkshetra *mandir* to pray. After a few sips of the spiced milk tea, I ask Ranabattrā if he knows about the Saptakoshi High Dam—*yes, I know some things*, he says—and if he could share his thoughts. There is a pause, and I grow

nervous. I try to explain who I am, why I am here, that I am not a journalist, only a student trying to learn. Pause, breath held. He turns to me. *Yes*, he says.

“The river is one of the places of prayer: in the Hindu religion, it is mentioned in scripture that the god and goddess of the Koshi are the most powerful, and if you pray to them you will gain power and a luxurious life. But I am a follower of the Kirat religion. In this philosophy, the Koshi River is also holy—we use it to pray twice a year. In the winter season, the god and goddess of Kirat come down to the riverside, so we go down there to pray.

“I don’t know whether the Koshi High Dam will be built or not, only the future knows. But if the dam is built, there may be benefits and losses. Most of the people in this community do not want to leave their homes and settlements, even if they will get new homes or more sophisticated homes. If the Nepali government agrees with India and is ready to construct the dam, then we must leave this place. But the government must make a clear policy and provide us with compensation, and that compensation should be enough for all of the people here. As compensation, we need this kind of settlement with water taps, water facilities, electricity, and even the same neighbours in our new settlement area. We need our temple nearby like we have here.

“If the government forcefully comes to build the dam, people will protest. All of the people from the affected area will unite and start campaigning against the government. If the community people do not support it, it is quite impossible for the construction to happen. We have religious beliefs and we will ask for help from others who believe in Hinduism and who come to Barahkshetra to pray.”

At this point, Ranabattrra pauses, one finger circling the rim of his tea glass. I thank him, not knowing if he is finished but wanting him to hear my gratitude anyways. He looks up, past me, and waves his hand at a man sitting against the wall beneath a painting of a peacock and a ripped Tuborg Beer calendar. “You can talk to him, my friend, Pradeep,” he says. “He knows some things, too.”

Pradeep Shrestha, I learn, is the son of the older women across the bridge with whom I had spoken earlier that morning. He laughs when I say that she wouldn’t tell me her name. “My mother, her name is Chatara Maya Shrestha,” he says, “and I hope she didn’t give you any trouble.” He, too, is eager to share.

“The Koshi is famous for being the biggest river in Nepal. It is famous for being holy and sacred—people come from different parts of the country to pray to the river. It is important for the people’s lives, it is good for tourism, it is important for religion. It supports local business and trade.

“My main concern is getting settlement, but also, what would be the source of income in the new settlement? Here in this community we have a traditional source of income, but will the government provide us with an alternative way of generating income? If we have to leave here, will there be an alternative way of making our livelihoods? What will it be? If they want to shift us from here then they have to provide us with training, business help, they have to support the education of our children. Here we already have a system that works, and we have traditional practices in this religious site that give us a small amount of money to support our lives.

“After listening to other people I am afraid that if the dam explodes, we will be in danger. People may lose their lives. But I am not an expert or a technician, I don’t know. Barakhshetra is a famous religious site. What will happen to this place if the dam is built? If its beauty is lost, we cannot compare this loss to the benefits of the dam. The *mandir* would be swept away and this is a great cost.”

Pradeep’s words brought me back to the moment three weeks earlier when I sat with Durga Pariyar, who held me in an unbroken gaze as she recounted her connection to the river and the land that had been her family’s home for generations. As we spoke on the stoop in front of her house, her fingers knotted a long spool of orange string around a wooden picture frame that she would later lay out on a table in front of her home, along with beaded garlands and sticks of incense, to sell to pilgrims descending upon the village. “To gain something new is less than to lose something old. In total there will be fewer benefits and more losses from the dam. To have the Koshi, this temple, and this religious place of Barakhshetra and Chatara is a golden opportunity for the people of this area. It is a natural gift, and we are lucky to have it, so it should not be destroyed in the name of the high dam.

“I have heard that some people have been talking about shifting our temple. If they construct the high dam, they will shift the Baraha and Chatara temples. But is this possible? How can they shift god?”

I had heard that the Saptakoshi River and surrounding area were considered sacred, and I was drawn to the Koshi Basin partly because of this. It was a romantic idea—that nature could somehow be holy, that a people’s kinship to a natural space

could look beyond the value of its resources into a deeper, more spiritual place, a place of devotion and worship and gratitude for the earth. What I found was much more concrete. The river is a part of everyday life. It is a source of drinking water, of irrigation for the farmland that provides food, a place to bathe and wash clothes and bring animals to drink, to collect sand and mud and wood to build and paint the homes scattered over the hills. The Saptakoshi is sacred not only because it is mentioned in holy scriptures, or because it is the confluence of seven river tributaries, or because it is said that Ganesh the elephant god descended here at Barahkshetra to bathe, but also because it is an inextricable part of everyday life. The relationship of the people with their river is a kind of relationship whose depth I could not begin to understand, one in which its basic and unremarkable daily function is just as significant, as indispensable, as its spiritual value. The river isn't just holy; it is necessary.

Less than a week after my meeting with Durga, I found myself at the Saptakoshi People's Rights Forum, a gathering of community members from the Struggle Committee against the High Dam. There, in a spacious sunlit room surrounded by rice paddies off the highway leading to Dharan, I met Deb Narayan Ray, an activist from Saptari district. At the meeting, twenty community leaders, all men, sat on plastic chairs around a table, along with me, sitting at the same table but conscious of my gender, my body, my size, of the fact that my *kurta* (long blouse) didn't fully cover my neck. I got the sense that they didn't take me too seriously. At the end of the five hour meeting, after black tea had been served in small cups and the sun had begun to descend behind the mountains, Deb approached me, offered me a

chair, asked me my name, my last name, my birthplace, my religion, my caste. He sat beside me, right hand in his plate of teatime snack, fingers swirling the yogurt and puffed rice and chopped cucumber and coriander, and said, “In our culture, river is mother, god, life. She has sustained us, allowed us to live, protected us. So for her, we must do the same.”

Field Notes from April 15th, trip to Barahkshetra, 6 am

Planned to travel to Barahkshetra and Aahale to conduct interviews today—did not realize that the former king of Nepal was going to Barahkshetra for the Kumbha Melaa today (huge festival that happens once every 12 years, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims and visitors from all over India and Nepal come for this event to pray and bathe, biggest and holiest event of the decade at Barahkshetra, if only I'd known!). Was stuck in a traffic jam for over 2 hours on the way—complete stand still, the driver got out and left for a while because there was no chance of movement. Bus was then not allowed to drive up to Barahkshetra because of the festival. Parked in bus lot and started walking the road to Barahkshetra. Hundreds of thousands of people from all over India and Nepal were there, all packed like sardines onto the one road leading to the temple, all trying to walk up at the same time. We were moving at a pace of one step a minute because it was so crowded and people were pushing and shoving from all sides. I was pressed against so many people and older women were yelling at me to give them room and there were too many elbows in my back and my stomach. At this rate it would take 3 hours and a lot of bruises to walk the three kilometers to the temple and river. Policemen were standing by but were overpowered by the crowds. It was 44 degrees C heat and becoming hard to breathe through all the people. Birat, my friend and journalism student from the local university who I was travelling with, had his hands on my back, was trying to keep hold of me in this rolling crowd, or maybe he was trying to steady himself so he wouldn't fall and get trampled. A few minutes later he put his mouth to my ear and yelled over the screaming men and babies and cows "if we stay we might get heat stroke or get trampled and die in the name of seeing the temple. Better to leave and come back." Decided it was best for safety's sake to go, and squeezed our way sideways through the crowd and past five policemen standing on top of a truck to a side alley, an escape. Took another half hour to return to the bus lot and more than three hours to drive back.

The Fertile Koshi: *Stories of Environmental Change*

“*The people downstream are sleeping on a bomb.*” – Chakra Regmi, Mahendra Nagar.

The river is deep and unyielding. Originating high in the Himalayan Mountains in Tibet, it snakes its way down into the Mahabharata Mountain Range—the seismically active zone on which the dam is to be built—and cuts through the plains of Nepal into India. The immense change in altitude and wide rain-catchment area causes the river to carry one of the highest sediment loads in the world¹⁴. Every monsoon, the water drags dark heavy silt downstream, leading to landslides and floods that the village residents have come to anticipate. The river is unstable; some have even said violent¹⁵. Residents of the Koshi Basin place flowers in the river, pray as the petals are sucked away with the current. “The Koshi is our *maharani* (goddess),” they say. She is celebrated as both the giver and taker of life.

It seemed that every person I spoke to would say the same thing: *flooding upstream, dryness downstream*. Although the government has shared very little information about the project with the communities by the river, it appeared that almost everyone knew, perhaps from past experience, what to expect from damming up a river as powerful as the Koshi. Upstream, behind the dam reservoir, the water level will rise up above the riverbed and flood out the surrounding villages, sweeping away land, houses, animals, and people. Downstream, the river’s natural course will

¹⁴ Dixit, Ajaya. “Kosi Embankment Breach in Nepal: Need for a Paradigm Shift in Responding to Floods.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, February 7 (2009).

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 72.

be diverted such that farmland can no longer rely on it as a source of irrigation, rendering the most fertile land in Nepal dry and unproductive. And then there's the possibility of enormous destruction if the dam were to fail. "The flow of the river is a natural process," Sir Mukhya had said to me as we chewed watermelon gum outside his home. "If they block its way, the river itself will create a new way. If the river finds a weak place or a place without compact soil, it may break the mountain or hill and cause an explosion. It will force its way through and make a new place for itself. Nobody knows where, but this explosion will be very dangerous, and it may be the biggest disaster to happen in Nepal."

Flooding upstream, dryness downstream. The words replay in my mind as the small bus trembles down the road. I am travelling to Prakaspur, a village downstream of the dam site that is primarily inhabited by farmers. I push my head against the window and squint through the dust that hangs in the air. Acres of lush green land stretch beyond; thick heads of corn and pale rice shoots poke through the mud in the paddy fields. The land is flat in this plains region of Nepal, and apart from the dusty road and the occasional house hung with lines of drying laundry, all I see is green. This is the first time in days that I can't see the river, yet its presence is everywhere, the land a testament to its life-giving power. A woman with a white cloth tied around her head chases a herd of goats with a stick. The water that sustains all of this will be transported elsewhere—and what of the farmers?

When the bus pulls up at the centre of town, I find myself in the middle of a produce market. Save for a thin walking path in the middle, the ground is covered in long strips of burlap, upon which are piled vegetables like I've never seen: zucchinis

the length of my arm, mounds of green and red chilies whose smell is enough to make my eyes burn, deep purple onions and dark okra stems, tomatoes glowing like red suns, knobs of ginger encrusted in dirt and cucumbers covered in rice sacks to protect them from the heat. Women who shade themselves with umbrellas or scarves crouch beside the rows, sifting through the piles with adept fingers to select the ripest picks for their customers. Rabin, a resident of Prakaspur who I had met at the Saptakoshi People's Rights Forum and who had agreed to show me around the village, pauses by a heap of long green leaves and picks up a handful, rubbing them between his fingers. He hands over several rupee notes to the saleswoman and tucks the bundle under his arm. "My wife will be happy;" he says, "her favourite."

We wander through the village and buy a lumpy green vegetable called *karela* (bitter gourd) and two glass bottles of Fanta. Eventually we reach a gate fashioned from sticks of bamboo, and we slip through into the outdoor courtyard of the village school. The classrooms are built from clay pasted over bamboo and straw, with long rectangular windows cut into the walls and rows of benches lining the inside. A stack of bricks at least six feet high rests outside expectantly. Across the courtyard is that familiar emerald: the cornfields and rows of rich soil surrounded by trees. Near the edge of the farm, I notice the rusted indigo frame of a soccer net. Three middle-aged women emerge from the schoolhouse, two wearing traditional clothes and one wearing a t-shirt emblazoned with the American flag.

We settle onto benches facing each other and introduce ourselves shyly. They are Maya, Sangeeta, and Sushila, three farmers from the village. Maya, sitting on the right, speaks the most, followed by Sangeeta, wearing the flag. While Sushila remains

quiet for most of our conversation, she pipes up to tell me how the floods from the Koshi Barrage and other projects blocked their roads and caused their village to suffer. “Twenty-five years ago a big flood came, and Wards 4 and 5 of Prakaspur were devoured by the Koshi River. After that, the main river diverged its course and many people were displaced, and like landless people they live outside. Every year people suffer from floods and erosion and they cannot survive. In the rainy season we always fear at night that the floods will come. We are always thinking about the river and suffering mentally. If the dam is built, it will be dangerous. We are mentally tortured by the worry of an earthquake¹⁶ or another disaster.”

I look over at the heads of corn that curl their leaves around the bamboo fence nearby. Maya follows my eyes. “We are farmers, most of us in this village, and downstream from the dam will become dry. Agriculture will suffer and our income will decrease, so we must build canals to get water. We are against building the high dam because—we aren’t sure about technical reasons, but we are scared. It will be dangerous. There are no benefits from the dam for Nepal, and even the surrounding Indian people will suffer. We will have problems with water if the dam is built, and many disadvantages.”

Sangeeta is nodding her head vigorously now, and she places a hand on Maya’s knee, as if to signal that she has something to share. She keeps her hand on the wrinkled cotton of Maya’s skirt while she speaks. “Women will be very affected. Most women are agricultural, house, and field workers, but men in rural areas are

¹⁶ Water experts such as Ajaya Dixit caution that constructing a large dam on the Saptakoshi River will be dangerous due to the high risks of sedimentation and flooding caused by in-catchment rainfall, as well as earth tremors in the high-earthquake zone of the proposed dam site (Dixit 2009).

not,” she says. “When the river is not near and we must go to worship, it will be difficult. Corn will not grow and our income will suffer. It is a social and economic issue. The soil will not be moist and we won’t have water.”

There is something about the three women sitting here across from me, hands on each other’s knees, now and then glancing at one another, skin around their eyes creasing, that makes my next question snag in my throat. As the pause grows longer, Sushila speaks up.

“The Koshi is beside Prakaspur and these are all wetlands, but the high dam will make it dry. Our Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve will be damaged. Without water the animals cannot stay—water buffalo and migratory water birds will go if there is no water! How can water animals live without water?”

Her words remind me of something that was said during the gathering of anti-dam activists at the Saptakoshi People’s Rights Forum. A short man with cropped black hair and a broad mustache sat at the corner of the table with his head in his hands. When it was his turn to speak, he stood, smoothing the wrinkles of his cream-coloured shirt, and introduced himself as Dev Prasag Chaulagai from the Buffer Zone—the area downstream of the dam site near the Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve, which is a nature conservation area on the river that attracts many tourists each year. In a deep voice that rose to a yell as he spoke, Dev told us how the Reserve will begin to dry up as the course of the river changes with the dam, which will drive the animals away and harm tourism and local business. As the animals leave the Reserve area in search of water, they might enter nearby villages and cause disturbances. “Koshi Tappu Wildlife Reserve is a wild buffalo reservation area, and those buffalo

will come to the village, destroy our crops, destroy homes, and kill people. This has already happened from the Koshi Barrage...last time a wild buffalo injured my brother, and there have been seven cases of people being killed by animals there.” He stopped abruptly and slumped back into his chair, dropping his head into his hands once more. He remained this way for the rest of the meeting.

In his wake, another resident of the Buffer Zone stood to say that many people in this region have taken out agricultural loans from the government, but they fear that if their crops fail due to a lack of irrigation or a flood sweeping away their land entirely, they will not be able to pay back their loans and may find themselves in trouble with the government. Back in Prakaspur, Rabin had mentioned a similar concern to me: “The banks will not provide loans for agriculture here because it is a risky area and we won’t be able to repay our loans if our lands suffer from the dam.” There it was: the government project office acknowledging the issues that will arise from the dam, but rather than offering compensation or working with the communities to devise a solution, rather than holding themselves accountable to these farmers whose livelihood depends on the land, they are reducing their support. They are creating “risks” and then refusing to help because it’s too “risky.” They are denying responsibility for the problems that they are spurring into existence.

The three women had moved closer together, Sangeeta’s slippered feet drawing spirals in the dust, Sushila wiping her glasses on the edge of her shawl. Three more lives ensnared in the fibers of this vast looming web. And the larger they spun the web, the more tangled it became. The concerns of flooding, failed crops, animal attacks, loss of business, increased burden on women to make the land

productive, are all stemming from a project that will supposedly provide irrigation to land across Nepal and India—to make the people’s lives easier. I think of Dev, still and quiet in his chair after sharing his fears, and of Sushila, how her fists had flexed and relaxed, curled and uncurled, as she listened to the other two women speak. True, the dam may increase access to water in certain parts of the country, but that depends on its accessibility diminishing elsewhere. And these are the people from whom it’s being taken.

Prakaspur, late afternoon. The flies descend as a faint orange glow spreads over the sky. Somewhere in the course of the day, a young woman carrying a baby with thin silver bracelets encasing his wrists sits down with us and listens. As the sun sets, the baby drops the leaf of corn he has been playing with and begins to fidget, whimpering. Maya squeezes his cheeks and speaks louder. “Listen now. We are not getting training for this. If the flood comes, we will all suffer. This is all we are thinking about. Especially during the three months of monsoon, we are all mentally suffering. We have been psychologically suffering because of the barrage and the dam will make it worse. We cannot sleep at night.”

Rabin, who has been sitting silently by my side this whole time, turns to me now, his eyes alight. “I have something to say,” he says. “Write this down! During marriage time, if I go to a lady’s house for my son and tell them I live in Prakaspur, she will say that she does not want to marry him because it would be a dangerous place for her to live. We are paying tax for the government but the government is not thinking about us. For whatever cost, the dam should not be established.”

He appears pleased, and I promise him that I will include his thoughts in my writing. This comment seems to catch the women's attention, and Maya leans forward in her seat, stretching her right hand towards me and peering into my face with seriousness in her own. "We have given you many answers," she begins slowly, "so now we want to know: how will you help us? Are you in support of our struggle against the high dam?"

My chest aches as I think of all those before her who had asked me similar questions: how will you put pressure on the Nepali government to change their decision? How will you alert your government to the situation? Why do you care about our struggles? How will you spread knowledge about the losses caused by the dam and the plight of the Koshi people? My privileged position as a student and a foreigner was apparent to all who I spoke with, and with this privilege came an expectation that I could somehow help. To the people I had met in the Koshi Basin, the fact that I had travelled across the world to hear their stories—stories that very few others had asked to hear—meant that I would do everything I could to support them. And perhaps it should. I look back into Maya's stern face. "Yes, I am," I say, "and I want to do everything that I can."

She nods her head from side to side and stands. "Do you like cucumber?"

Maya disappears behind the school building for a few minutes. When she returns, she is carrying a tin tray with five whole large cucumbers, whitish-green and plump around the middle. We gather at the water pump near the wall of the schoolhouse and Sushila presses down on the lever while Maya washes each cucumber under its steady stream. "From our farm," she murmurs as she passes her

hands over the smooth skin to rub away any dirt. Sushila releases the pump and they hand Rabin and me each a cucumber before taking their own. Unsure how to proceed, I hesitate with the cucumber in my hands for a moment. Maya laughs and raises the entire cucumber to her lips, taking a bite as if it were an apple. “Nepali style!” the others say as they do the same. I bite into my cucumber and am surprised to find the flesh inside crisp and sweet, the seeds long and gummy. We stand together, eating and laughing, delighting in the chill of the cucumber juice as the humid air gives way to an evening breeze.

Field Notes from April 14th—attempt to set up a meeting with the Joint Commissions Office in Biratnagar

Called Biratnagar number for Joint Commissions Office (office created to research the potential impacts of the high dam and to conduct a Detailed Project Report survey). People at the JCO refused to meet me because they did not want to discuss the Saptakoshi Dam. When I asked why, they said that all/any documents they have about Koshi Dam are reserved for the Indian government only (“their right only”). When I pressed further, they tried to direct me to speak with or visit the Joint Commissions Office in Delhi, but would not agree to meeting or speaking with me.

The Koshi is Our Right: *Stories of Resistance*

“The water of the Koshi is political.” – Krishna Bhattarai, Dharan.

“We aren’t thinking about compensation because we don’t want them to build the dam. We’re saying to the government, don’t build the dam!” – Sangeeta Rai, Prakaspur.

As I pick my way across the path leading to the dam site, I notice words written thickly across the rocks in pink paint: ‘*Jal, jangal, jamin*’ or, ‘water, forest, land.’ I continue on the path, and notice another smear of pink in the dusty grey landscape: this one reads, ‘*ILO 169 laagu gara.*’ I read it over a few more times, trying to make sense of the words and numbers, and finally jot it down in my notebook to look up later. Walking on, it’s as if the words are following me—painted on the stones that jut out from the hillside, scrawled in dripping letters on the slab of concrete supporting the bridge to the village of Tribeni: *jal, jangal, jamin, maathi adivaasi janajatiko adhikaar sunischit gara* (ensure the rights of indigenous people to water, forest, and land).

I was walking to meet Chitra Bahadur Rai, the self-proclaimed leading anti-dam activist from Bhojpur district, and a few residents of other villages whom he had promised to bring along. We were to meet in the village of Simli, upstream of the dam site, at 10am, so I had woken up at 4:00 that morning to share a hot cup of tea and a plate piled with rice and lentils with the family that had taken me in before embarking on the two hour drive and three hour hike up the hills into the village. The heat bloomed early in the months leading up to the monsoon, and I was glad to have begun the ascent before the blistering midday hours. In the bright stillness of the

morning, the river was a deep green, dark against the pearly sand that lined its banks. A raft made from bamboo lay nestled by the shore, and it rocked lazily with the current. Amid the serenity, deep pockmarks that had been drilled into the rock to test its stability for the High Dam dotted the cliff across the valley like a series of small caves. As I counted the drill holes in the hill festooned with trees, I kept thinking that this might soon transform into a wall of concrete, smooth and grey, flanked by a pane of unmoving water.

As I walked, I imagined the kinds of questions I would ask someone who called himself the foremost anti-dam activist. At this point, no one else whom I had spoken with had labeled themselves as such, and yet, out of all the people I had met, only one had been in favour of the dam. His name was Ashok Thapa, and he had in fact called himself the leading pro-dam activist in the area. Everyone else—the village residents, community leaders, farmers, mothers, brothers, had recounted to me their fears of disaster, their lack of trust that the government would provide them with compensation or resettlement, their connection to the land, the ways the river shaped their life. In great detail, some had even exposed the protest actions they had seen, heard, or been involved with. Outside his shop-front home, Sir Mukhya had leaned back in his chair, half-smiled to reveal his small teeth, red from chewing tobacco, and said, “Once, the Nepali government and the Ministry of Water organized a discussion group in Chatara village for people to attend. The Secretary of the Minister was present and he asked the people why they should not build the dam, what are the pros and cons? We discussed this and reached the conclusion that the government’s intention is to build the high dam and the local people’s intention is to stop this.”

Earlier, as her hands had wound dyed thread around a picture frame in increasingly quick motions, Durga Pariyar had kept her eyes fixed on me to say, “At the time of the Detailed Project Report survey, the Indian government and its agents established an office in Chatara and ran all of their activities from there. When the people started their first movement of protest meetings and rallies against the dam, most of them got angry and ran to the office, broke all of the doors, tables, computers and everything else and shut it down forever, as they say. The Indian agents left that place and returned home, and after that they only come occasionally and separately to Chatara. They go to the High Dam area, collect some data and information without exposing it, and return to their contract office in Biratnagar or in India.” Calmly, without fear or hesitation, these residents had told me of their bold actions against the dam as if they were a regular part of life, just another activity to fit in between the daily routine of boiling rice for lunch and taking the cows down to the river to drink. Perhaps, in this remote part of the country where the dam was trying to quietly stake claim over the water and land, resistance didn’t have to be something loud and glamorous. Perhaps just continuing to exist here, to use this water and cultivate this land, was to resist. To resist is to live¹⁷.

I met Ashok Thapa where he was providing free meals to those who had travelled from afar to attend the Kumbha Melaa festival. In an enormous white tent in the village of Chatara, I found him clad in a button-down shirt with a white laminated nametag clipped to the collar. Hundreds of people milled in and around the tent,

¹⁷ Adapted from the slogan “To struggle is to live” from the Sardar Sarovar *Andolan*—the resistance to the Narmada Dam project in India, as explored by Jacques Leslie in his book, “Deep Water: The Epic Struggle over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment.”

ducking under its cover to rest in the shade or clutching disposable trays with in-built compartments for rice, *daal*, vegetables, pickle, and curd. When I approached, Ashok passed off his food serving duties and led me through the back flap of the tent and out into the sunlight. We chose a spot to sit on a ledge beneath a tree, and he introduced himself as a community leader, social worker, and lead activist in support of the Saptakoshi Multipurpose High Dam. What he told me was not very different from what everyone else had: that the dam would destroy biodiversity and kill fish, flood out over 82 VDCs, and pose a risk of earthquakes because of the active seismic zone. He spoke of the cultural extinction that would occur as a result of the displacement and destruction caused by the dam—of cultures that “will definitely be destroyed but cannot be compensated.” He mentioned that India might receive more benefits from the project, and that the communities are in doubt that they will be given compensation considering the 4500 *bigha* land that was destroyed and uncompensated from the Koshi Barrage. The issue, he said, was that the Nepali people are unaware of the benefits of the dam: that 3300 MW of hydroelectricity would be produced from the dam, that there is “lots of space” to resettle in Nepal, and that a 54 km road would be built on either side of the river, which would improve access to Kathmandu and transportation of goods. The task is to convince people of the opportunities the dam will bring, he had said, and to allow the Detailed Project Report to be completed rather than protesting it as has been the case over the last decade.

“Even though there will be losses, the benefits are greater,” he had said to close, as if this explained it all. I wondered how the electricity would be shared

between India and Nepal, and whether it would reach these small villages. I remembered how Ranabattrra Rai in the tea stall in Barakhshetra had told me that he feared a road would be built that would displace many of the hillside villages, and how Kamal and Devi had moved to a settlement that was much smaller than their previous homes. I was beginning to think that the ‘cost versus benefit’ approach to development decisions was inadequate, as the overall benefits of the project for the country will likely not reach the local level of the vulnerable populations who are bearing the losses. The international nature of the dam proposal means that the decision makers are outside of the affected communities, allowing them to glaze over the inequality of the dam beneficiaries and local populations, who are socially and spatially disadvantaged.

After our talk, Ashok graciously offered me a plate of food from the tent, and I savoured the spicy pickled tomatoes and the cooling yoghurt. I believed I had heard only honesty from this man, whose willingness to admit the mistakes of the past and desire to revise the old water treaties in favour of Nepal made me trust that he too hoped that something would change. What I didn’t trust was that those mistakes of the past won’t be repeated.

8:45am, on the path to Simli. The clock on my phone blinked at me dimly, and I wondered how much longer it would be until I reached the group of anti-dam activists. Further up the path, I saw a man with a woven basket the size of his entire upper-body strapped to his back, filled with cloth bags from which protruded dried brown *rudraksha* seeds strung together on thick cords to form prayer beads. “How far

to Simli?” I asked as he approached. “You are near,” he replied. “When you reach the suspension bridge, cross over and walk through the next two villages. The third one will be Simli.”

I arrived in the village just before ten o’clock and spent a while wandering up and down the stone pathway, asking those who sat outside whether they had seen or knew of Chitra Bahadur Rai. He wasn’t here, I learned. After hovering aimlessly near some chickens for a few minutes, I was called over by an elderly woman who told me to go wait in the tin-roofed patio of a nearby tea shop, where there was a clear view of the path leading up to the village from the river. I bought a drink, settled into a plastic blue deck chair near the edge of the patio, and turned to face the path to watch and wait.

The hours passed, and the tiny black signal bars on my phone had long disappeared. The thought of leaving crossed my mind several times, but it had taken me hours to arrive here and I couldn’t imagine another opportunity to meet Chitra. There was nothing to do but wait. As I sipped my drink, I realized that this must be a resting spot for people who were travelling between villages. Many families with young children and older people travelling alone would stop on the patio, devouring steaming plates of rice and *daal* or slipping off their sandals to rest their feet. A middle-aged man in a blue jacket who leaned his weight on a worn wooden stick climbed up from the river and stepped onto the patio, sitting down at the same table as me. He took an interest in the small plastic recording device that I had been using for the interviews, and we began to discuss the reason why I was waiting alone in a hillside village with a pen, a notebook, and a Nepali-English dictionary in my bag. He

introduced himself as Bharat Shrestha, and I asked him if he had any thoughts about the Saptakoshi High Dam. Leaning forward in his chair, he picked up the recorder and pressed the round red button in the middle.

“[The river] is important for people to collect drinking water, and it is a holy river—we pray in the river, and use it for irrigation on the riverside, for growing rice. It is positive to build the dam because it is a symbol of development. It will create a good environment for many people and bring more opportunities like rafting, boating, fishing. But in this sort of a village, people will be displaced, and what will they do? Will they receive compensation from the government? If so, then it is okay to build the dam. If not, then their future will go to the dark.”

After drinking a cup of tea, Bharat picked up his walking stick, murmured his goodbyes, and left, leaving me alone on the patio except for a cat that stared up from beneath a chair with watery grey eyes. Turning back to the path and the river, I noticed a woman crossing the suspension bridge while lugging a bulging plastic bag. She stopped at the centre of the bridge, extended her arms out over the side, and emptied the bag, releasing a stream of bottles, cans, and scraps of garbage into the water below. The fragments landed neatly and bobbed above the surface before floating on with the current. My eyes travelled to a group of women crouched by the edge of the river, cleaning clothes by pounding the fabric against wet stones with a rhythm of dull *thwacks* that was both forceful and graceful. Further upstream, a long bamboo raft burdened with parcels wrapped in a wrinkled blue tarp drifted below the bridge, and it took me a moment to realize that there was a man squatted among the packages, steering the raft with a pole.

Just before 1:00, the group of activists arrived. There were five of them, all men with the same last name, Rai, signifying that they were all part of the same indigenous ethnic group, although they were from different districts of the middle-hills region. Chitra and three of the others were wearing golf shirts in varying shades of turquoise, although the oldest of the men wore a vest over his shirt and a canvas *topi* on his head. The fifth man wore an unbuttoned grey shirt and pants with a thick corduroy hat, a small stone strung around his neck on a piece of twine, and white markings painted around his eyes and cheeks. They introduced themselves as indigenous leaders, activists, and community members who were all acquainted and worked together despite hailing from different villages.

“The dam will be the destroyer of culture,” began Ram, the man in grey. And they were off—detailing the various riverside temples, statues of deities built in hillside caves, and spiritual practices that will be washed away with the floods, explaining how they expected no benefits, describing how they were in the process of collecting information about how many temples, how much land, how many people will be affected to present to the government. “The resistance movement has been going on for nine years. There are several committees—first, the Saptakoshi People’s Committee, and under this are separate district and VDC level committees, under which are toll and ward level committees. All these people are combined in one network, so if the government forces the dam construction, they will rally together and start a movement, gather in the dam area,” explained Bardam. They described how they were engaging in dialogues with local stakeholders such as community forestry organizations and religious institutions, and had even started several “Koshi

Education Schools” to raise awareness at the community level and to stimulate involvement in the movement. Along with the other activists, they had organized 44 community-level meetings that year, were disseminating a booklet containing the stories of women from the affected communities, and had organized several dialogues with the government, which they had left bitterly and without resolution.

As Chitra spoke about their efforts to communicate with the government officials, I was reminded of something that Rabin had mentioned to me during our visit to Prakaspur about the current political instability that was harming their efforts to negotiate with the government. As we walked between fields of thick-stemmed sunflowers, their yellow heads turned towards the darkening sky, he said, “Last year in Sunsari and Saptari district, more than 70 people explained the issues to members of parliament. They said, ‘these are the problems, please don’t construct the high dam.’ But then the parliament collapsed and now the government has no rights to do anything.” I was astounded at everything that these communities were doing—their repeated attempts to make their voices heard to a government that was considered to be in constitutional anarchy. Nine years of raising their voices. I wondered: for how long would they fight? *To struggle is to live*¹⁸.

The stricken look on Chitra’s face as he spoke pulled me back to the present. “Nine districts will be affected and 83 VDCs destroyed; nine in Dhankuta, nineteen in Bhojpur, sixteen in Udaypur, three in Khotang...”

As the conversation progressed to the issue of compensation, we were joined by three men wearing navy-blue army outfits and black boots, a few elderly people

¹⁸ Leslie, Jacques. *Deep Water: The Epic Struggle over Dams, Displaced People, and the Environment*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux: New York, 2005.

with dusty legs who were passing through, and the toothless woman in a pink sari and orange hooded sweatshirt who worked in the shop. The group crowded around, pulling up chairs and squeezing together, craning their necks to listen. The next sentence Chitra spoke was met with enthusiastic nods and grunts from the group, but I hadn't understood. "Could you please repeat that?" I asked, scooting my chair closer to the group of people before me.

"We found an appeal on a flyer saying that we will get compensation for all the fruits and belongings that we lose. But it doesn't say who will provide the compensation, and the process isn't clear. It's just a lollipop to convince the people and make them favour the dam. While building the Koshi Barrage, the people who lost possessions and land still haven't been compensated 100 years later. How can the government of India say that the people will get compensation now? We have no trust."

Compensation seemed to be one of the most contested issues in regards to the dam, with a lack of common understanding over what, if anything, was being offered to the affected communities. At the People's Rights Forum, a quiet man who had travelled from the Buffer Zone had told me he had heard that the government was dividing the affected area into three zones—green, yellow, and red—based on the amount of damage the land would endure, and planning to give 0%, 25%, or 50% compensation depending on the scale of loss. Another participant, with a sparse comb over and wide-set eyes, had stood holding a crisp red notebook to speak about *aailani*, or unregistered land. "The government held a survey in Udaypur [district] to determine the amount of occupied land, but there is one problem—most of the land

that people are using is not registered land—it belongs to the government, and they don't have land registry certificates. What will happen? If they are displaced from there, will they be compensated?"

I thought back to the afternoon that I had spent with Sir Mukhya, the ache in my left heel where my sandal had rubbed off the skin, the rivulets of sweat that ran down his neck. As the sun rose higher in the sky and the roosters anxiously crooned, Sir Mukhya had laid out for me the system of economic valuation in Nepal that would leave his community wanting. "Listen," he had said, resting an elbow on the locked moneybox beside him. "There is a process in Nepal where the government's valuation system is lower than the market price. The government will evaluate the economic value of our land, and we will get compensation according to the government rate, which will not be enough. If we have to leave here, we demand compensation at the market rate." Taking in my look of confusion, he pulled a lollipop wrapped in a twist of pink paper from the jar beside him, held it between us, and pressed on, "If the market price of this good is twenty rupees, the government will evaluate its price as two rupees. Then the eighteen rupees will be lost for the community people. Who will get those eighteen rupees? Are the Nepali and Indian government ready to pay for all the losses?"

I felt as if I were collecting more questions than answers.

I stood exhausted on the unpaved village road. I was with Naresh, a journalist from a nearby town who had offered to host me for a while on the condition that I teach his son English so that he could get into a better school. He was wearing a vest

with eight baggy pockets over a lavender shirt that read “Untied Clours of Benethon” in peeling white letters across the chest. To our left, perched on the edge of the cliff overlooking the river, was a row of houses, the doorways open, a pig shuffling in the dust behind a low fence. To our right, the terraced hills rose high above us, blossoming with thick green leaves that stretched up at the sky. A path inset with stones had been cut into the hill, and a young boy with a dark curl of hair on his brow sat on the top step, surveying us as he tugged his shirt over his knees.

Naresh and I were standing on either side of a water-spout, which was fashioned from a black rubber hose tied to a stick with a piece of rope to hold it above ground. With a soft hiss, it released a constant trickle of water that formed a muddy pool on the pathway. I swirled my toes in the puddle as Naresh filled up his plastic Mountain Dew bottle and took a long drink. When he had capped the bottle and stowed it away in his satchel, he crouched down beside the spout so that his face was inches from the stream. For a moment I thought he would start drinking straight from the hose, but instead he lifted his hand and placed two thick fingers over the mouth of the spout, blocking the flow of water. “A dam,” he said with great focus, “is containment. We imagine we can build something stronger than water. But there is nothing stronger than nature.” With his other hand, he reached around the back of the spout and pinched the hose, twisting the rubber back and forth while keeping the fingers of his right hand clamped firmly over the mouth. The spout gurgled in protest and emitted a noise like a feeble sigh. Naresh’s wrist twitched. And then the water began to seep out, slipping between his two fingers and rolling down his arm. He

dropped his hand, and the water rushed forth, cascading to the ground with a defiant splatter. “Release,” he whispered.

ILO 169, I later learned, stands for the International Labour Organization Convention 169—a major international law established in 1989 on the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples. A foundational aspect of the law from which all its provisions stem is ‘consultation and participation’: requiring that indigenous peoples are informed, consulted, and able to participate in the issues and development processes that affect them. According to this convention, the government must take into account the impact of the dam on the lives, institutions, cultures, land, and beliefs of indigenous communities. As stated in Article 7 of the Convention, indigenous peoples have the right to “decide their own priorities for the process of development as it affects their lives, beliefs, institutions and spiritual well-being and the lands they occupy or otherwise use, and to exercise control over their economic, social and cultural development.”¹⁹ The goal here is to initiate dialogue between governments and indigenous groups, with the onus being on the government to coordinate the necessary actions to protect indigenous peoples and to resolve, or to prevent, conflicts.

From the stories I had heard over the last few weeks, I was beginning to piece together a picture of the government that is not upholding this responsibility. According to the activists and community leaders with whom I had spoken, *they* have been the ones to initiate dialogues with government representatives in an attempt to

¹⁹ ILO Convention 169 (English), www.ilo.org

share the local people's perspectives. 'Participation' in policy and decision-making is a distant goal that seems almost unattainable to the communities who are being excluded from the negotiation process. "The right of the decisions should be given to the people of these communities. If officials and citizens can jointly decide, there will be no conflict," Sir Mukhya had said. And yet, without the inclusion of the perspectives of local communities in the decision-making process, this kind of development becomes exclusionary towards the people whose lives will be most immediately impacted by the project. It creates an inequitable power structure, as the people who are excluded from the decisions are also those who have less political and social standing and less ability to make their demands heard. By excluding these voices from the negotiation process, the project further marginalizes these communities and will continue to do so if they must endure the consequences of the dam without reaping the benefits.

The residents of the affected villages are not being informed, let alone involved in negotiations, about the dam project—the confusion over the offers of compensation points to a lack of communication on the part of the government. As we sat together in a stall in Barakhshetra, Ranabattrai Rai had said to me with a sadness in his voice that was both indignant and defeated, "What to do? They are going to build this dam with an agreement between Nepal and India, but we don't know what will be in the agreement. I don't think the people will find out what's in the agreement in the future, so we won't know whether it will be harmful or profitable for the nation. That agreement should be shared with these communities in the affected areas." And Pradeep Shrestha, his friend, the son of the shopkeeper who

didn't want to leave her small happy world, had said as we sipped on too-sweet tea: "There are two sides of everything, and such is also the way with this dam issue. Still, most people are confused. Even I am unclear. The concrete facts about the dam have not been explained to the local communities, and this is the biggest problem." And during the Saptakoshi People's Rights Forum, Deb Narayan Ray had stood as the sun began to sink below the cornfields to say, "The Nepali people's right to information is not being applied. Regarding the High Dam, most of the people are confused. Some say it will be constructed, others don't, but this is the case because there is no right to information."

How can these communities decide their own priorities for the development process—one of the core rights of the C169—if they haven't even been given the information necessary to make these decisions?

Will the government offer a compensation package that measures up to the losses?

Is there such a thing?

Can they be trusted to follow through on their promises this time?

Where is all of the fertile, available land that will take in these displaced communities?

Will the water, the electricity, ever reach them?

Who owns this river, this land, these hills?

How long can they resist?

What to do?

Apply ILO 169. Painted on the rocks, the bridges, the trees. Etched into the very foundations of this place.

I hopped off the rickshaw onto the side of the highway. The road was enclosed in a tangled thicket of trees, and it climbed upward for as far as I could see into the foothills of the Mahabharata Mountain range. The rickshaw driver readjusted the bundle of cloth around his head as I fished in my bag for some rupee notes. The skin of his arms and calves was pulled taught over his muscles, as if there were nothing in between. I paid him the equivalent of thirty cents and asked where I could find the Dharan Community Meeting Hall. Left, he said, one foot on the bike pedal. All the way at the end of the road. Past the yellow house with the flag.

The walls of the meeting hall were covered in tall windows facing out onto the expanse of rice paddies and cornfields and hay bales rising from the ground like collapsed huts. Through the glass I could see a group of men sitting at an L-shaped table, some scribbling in notebooks, others reclining in their chairs, one speaking into a cellphone. I walked in late, tried to ignore the fifteen pairs of eyes that followed me as I took a seat next to Naresh. A whiteboard dappled with marker residue was screwed to the front wall of the room, and the words “Saptakoshi People’s Rights Forum, *Baisakh* 2069” were written in Devnagari letters—a relic of past meetings, as it was now 2071 in the Nepali calendar. Above, lining the entire length of the whitewashed wall where it met the corrugated tin ceiling, were six framed watercolour paintings. In fading hues of green and blue, they depicted scenes of the river twisting through the hills, cows grazing beside small brown houses while people knelt to work in the fields.

Krishna, the coordinator of the group, which called itself the main Struggle Committee, was going over the primary issues to be addressed and the agenda for the meeting. After almost an hour, he opened up the floor, and we went around the room with each person standing to introduce himself and share the issues that had arisen in his village and the progress that was being made.

“To raise our voice strongly against the dam, we have to join hands, work with the Indian people who will be affected and make a people’s network in Nepal like the one in India. The Indian activists are also eager to have a discussion and join hands, so this is our opportunity to work together.” – Deb Narayan Ray, Saptari district

“To discuss and start a local movement is one solution, but policies can create a lasting solution. That’s why, above all, the government policy regarding the Koshi River should be changed and the agreement between Nepal and India signed in 1950 should be cancelled and rewritten in favour of the Nepali people.” – Mustak Ansari, Buffer Zone

“The people from my village requested several times that the political parties support us against the construction of the High Dam. But the political parties say yes and then they don’t take action—they are playing a dual role. That itself is the issue. The Indian government has brought construction equipment near the Nepal-India border to a place called Forbesganj. This means that the Indian government is ready and standing by, and once they get a signal they will start to construct the dam. At that time, we cannot stop them. That’s why, from right now, we need to start a big and aggressive movement against the High Dam. Our local committee has decided not to give them a chance to construct the dam. If they come with equipment, we will obstruct them.” – Chakra Regmi, Mahendra Nagar

“The Red Cross should establish an early warning system for rising water levels on the Koshi River like they have on other rivers—this would be good practically. But the information has to be shared with the local people, not just with the government and officials.” – Sushila Adhikari, during my visit to the school in Prakaspur

“There is a crisis of facilitators to mediate between the government and communities in this issue. Some of them come from the government and favour them, some come from political parties and favour them, and some are in favour of the community people. We need one good facilitator to clarify everything and to cooperate.” – Pradeep Shrestha, at a tea stall in Barahkshetra

“By seeing all these scenarios, we have come to the conclusion that both the Nepali and Indian governments should revise the previous agreement and give out all of the compensation [from the Koshi Barrage] first. After that we will be able to trust the

government and be convinced about the dam, or be ready to talk about it. Only then will we allow India to complete the Detailed Project Report. Otherwise we are not in favour of the dam.” – Kamal Bahadur Katwal, during my visit to his home in Mahendra Nagar

Here in the Saptakoshi River Basin, the communities who will be struck down by the dam are being shut out from discussion. But to anyone who takes the time to listen, it is clear that they’re fighting their way in. The project claims to represent progress for Nepal, but I have to ask: whose interests are being prioritized? The changes desired by the government and the local communities do not entirely clash—throughout the Middle Hills and the Plains, I heard calls for electricity, irrigation, and flood control, all of which coincide with the goals of the High Dam. Yes, there is an appetite for change. And yet, these communities also desire, or even need, to preserve the natural environment, protect their sacred spaces, and have the option to stay in their communities and homes. So the question remains: can large-scale development projects coexist with the preservation of culture, lands, and beliefs?

The people living along the Koshi River showed me that resistance is not an option—it is a necessity. Losing their river, farmland, homes, communities, and temples means losing the daily and sacred practices that are so intertwined with each of these spaces, and thus losing what has been theirs for generations. The dam represents much more than a threat to the land: it is a threat to the people’s spirit. It will degrade more than it is intended to. Perhaps, then, resistance is a survival instinct.

The Changing Koshi: *Stories of Possibility*

“It is the responsibility of the government to make the information clear to all of the people first.” – Sir Mukhya, Aahale

I stand at the river’s edge in the shade of a tree with worn sacred threads wound tightly around its bulging trunk. Naresh, the journalist, is by my side, leaning against the tree and wiping the sweat from his brow, while his five year-old son, Asit, crouches by my feet, sucking on a coconut popsicle as the milky juice dribbles down his chin. It is a Saturday during the Khumba Melaa festival in Chatara village, just downstream of the dam site, and the din of thousands of people chatting and laughing, chanting and calling to one another fills the air around us. Naresh had decided that morning to bring us here as a treat—to eat sweet festival foods, pose together for photographs outside the village monument, pay our respects at the temple and river, and buy a bright pink inflatable tube that Asit would later show off to his friends. Long bamboo huts the size of auditorium halls dot the village, erected to house the estimated 10 million people who were to visit the festival over the course of the month. Uniformed police officers and non-governmental organization workers were stationed near the temporary water tanks and toilets, hands clasped behind their backs, watching the crowds.

We watch as six young boys splash around in the river, crawling up onto a sandy knoll in the middle to rest for a few minutes before disappearing back into the murky green water. A bearded man pulling a monkey adorned with red *tikkaa* on a rope pauses beside us for a moment, murmuring something about the heat before moving on, monkey in tow. “He is a pilgrim from India,” whispers Naresh. “They

come for the festival to pray and make money with their animals.” Behind us, brightly dressed families slip off their sandals to enter the temple to worship, while others mill about the dusty street, listening to the music that booms from massive speakers, crunching on packaged ice-cream cones, or crowding around makeshift tents where shop-owners fry snacks in tall vats of oil. The signs of globalization, of interaction with the outside, are everywhere.

I take a sip from my bottle of juice and think back to what Chatara Maya, the elderly woman from the neighbouring village of Barahkshetra, had said to me. “People from different parts of the country and from India and foreign places all come to the Koshi. Some of them pray, some complete rituals, some go rafting or boating. Through this, every year we interact with many outsiders at Barahkshetra and gain new ideas, new thoughts, and new practices. This is one of the good parts of interacting with the outside. There is no problem with lodging or food here, since there are public guesthouses run by the temple committees and food is cheaper so people can stay here. This provides us with an opportunity to have interactions with outside people.”

I was seeing more and more how interactions with the outside world were not uncommon in the villages by the Koshi—and as described by Chatara Maya, they were often accepted and even welcomed by the communities. Change, I had learned, was not entirely unwanted here. As I travelled between villages, I heard an interest in new perspectives, foreign goods, and even larger developments that could benefit farmers and small business owners such as more reliable electricity and irrigation. I heard demands for a new canal to increase access to water and laments over the

increasing load-shedding²⁰ hours in the area, which peaked at about sixteen powerless hours per day while I was there. The root of the resistance to the High Dam didn't come from a fear of change, but rather from a fear of the many kinds of insecurities that the dam would bring to these communities—environmental, cultural, social, and economic—as well as from the lack of consideration for their needs and their exclusion from dialogue. Their desire to preserve their cultures, traditions, and ancient customs did not rule out the possibility of development, as long as the changes were beneficial to the communities and would allow them to sustain their own practices and ways of living. As I learned more about the development goals of the country and of the local Koshi Basin residents, I began to see how their wants and needs were not entirely different; what was missing was the dialogue, the necessary negotiations between them and the inclusion of local ideas and perspectives in the process.

On the day that I met Chatara Maya, I also became acquainted with a woman named Deepa, who worked in one of the stores in the main market in Barahkshetra selling items for ritual use by the river such as sticks of incense, bulky orange jugs to fill with holy water, and sacks of rice and flower petals. The afternoon was drawing to a close, and the narrow pedestrian strip between the rows of stores was alive with pilgrims and visitors filling up every open space, crowding into stores to drink tea and scoop up hot mouthfuls of rice and lentils after a long day of walking and worship.

²⁰ Also known as rolling blackouts, load-shedding refers to the region-wide intentional power-cuts regulated by the Nepali government due to the country's power crisis from insufficient production and transmission infrastructure. Although Nepal has a high potential for hydropower generation, decreasing water levels and low flow in the rivers mean that the country is not generating enough energy to meet its demand. The load-shedding hours increase in the dry season, reaching up to 16 hours per day in the previous winter season, and decreasing to about 10 hours per day during the monsoon season. While in Kathmandu the power-cuts follow a regular schedule, outside of the capital they tend to occur haphazardly and without warning.

Deepa sat on a low step outside her shop, wearing a sequined magenta *kurta* and a thick gold bangle on each wrist. Long braided sacred threads of every colour were draped from a string above her head, and she repeatedly pushed them aside with her red *tikkaa*-stained fingers as she spoke with customers. Her forehead furrowed when I told her I was a student researching the Saptakoshi Multipurpose High Dam, and she turned around and waved frantically to her husband inside the shop, who appeared in the doorway in an instant, dressed in a sweat-stained undershirt and wiping his fingers on a greying rag. It took me several minutes to convince Deepa that she could answer my questions first. Her eyebrows knit further together, but she agreed, looking down into her smooth palms in deep thought each time I asked a question.

“This is a holy place, people come for free, and we drink the water and use it daily. There is easy access to water here. It is called the Saptakoshi because it is a connection of seven rivers, and the joint point of the Koshi and Koka is the most important and holy. Lots of people wish to come here to Barahkshetra and Chatara because they are drawn to the Koshi.” She motioned to the various trinkets and powders displayed on the table beside her and explained how bathing in the river brought the worshipper strength and relief.

“People talk about the high dam and so many people come and go here, saying ‘high dam, high dam,’ but actually we know very little about the dam. Some people say it is for hydropower, some say it is for irrigation, but we don’t know what it actually is. As far as I have heard from other people, if the dam is built, it will bring some problems and some opportunities. The road will be built and people will gain employment. Their businesses will run smoothly, and it will help development. But

most of the people in this area will lose their homes and livelihoods. I have heard that there will be many, many problems. People always talk about the effects of the high dam...they say the effects will happen above the dam, but we don't know if it will affect us below, here in this market area and in Chatara. If the dam will affect Barahkshetra and the Chatara market, it should not be constructed. If the dam is built, it will be a symbol of development in Eastern Nepal, so if there are fewer losses and more benefits then they should build the dam.”

As I mulled over her words on the drive home, it occurred to me that she had pointed to one of the main issues that her community was facing: they were not being given the information necessary to make an informed decision about the dam. The foundation for being able to give prior and informed consent rests on those being threatened by the dam having all of the information to consider the proposal in its entirety. And yet, the general lack of awareness that I found in the affected communities about the construction, compensation, and benefits associated with the dam sheds light on the truth that the conditions for informed consent are not being met here.

In November of 2000, the World Commission on Dams (WCD), which is a group that formed after a World Bank summit in the 1990s, released a report entitled *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making* that assesses the impacts of large dams and provides recommendations for their future. Among its findings about the enormous environmental and social costs of dams and the lack of equity in distribution of benefits, the report exposes the disproportionate impact of large dams on indigenous and tribal peoples, while the beneficiaries of the irrigation,

tourism, electricity, flood control, and water supply are often urban dwellers and other groups who do not bear its social burdens²¹. In the section on equity and distribution, the report states, “The WCD Case Studies show that the direct adverse impacts of dams have fallen disproportionately on rural dwellers, subsistence farmers, indigenous peoples, ethnic minorities, and women. These groups, who are also often the poorest segments of society, tend to be over-represented in the numbers of people who are displaced from reservoirs sites or lose access to their traditional livelihoods.”²² These groups in particular bear the greatest costs due to structural inequalities, discrimination, and economic, political, and cultural marginalization that often result in a neglect of their rights. To address these findings, the report recalls the International Labour Organization Convention 169 and calls for the “free, prior, and informed consent” of indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups to development projects, stating that their active participation should be made a key part of the decision-making process²³.

I think of Chitra Bahadur Rai and the other indigenous activists in Simli, of Maya and Sangeeta who fear for what will happen to their farms and livelihoods, of Devi who is bearing the burdens of her resettlement as a woman and a farmer, of Sir Mukhya who views the construction of a road in his rural village not as a sign of urbanization but as another means of displacement. These are the people who the WCD would categorize as ‘vulnerable,’ and their experiences show that they are

²¹ World Commission on Dams. *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*. Earthscan, London (2000), p.125.

²² Ibid, 124.

²³ Ibid, 216.

indeed facing greater costs without necessarily receiving benefits. While this trend in the inequities perpetuated by large dams across the world was recognized fifteen years ago, these people are still fighting to be heard, to be valued, and to be included in a decision-making process to which they are, in the words of the WCD, “integral.”²⁴ What astounds me is that such issues have been recognized as a structural problem of the dam decision-making process across the world, and particularly in communities in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where the rivers support local economies, cultures, and ways of life for large parts of the populations²⁵, and yet little is being done to address the inequities. These people are asking for little more than that their government listens to the recommendations of an international commission. How is it that, amidst the rhetoric of informed consent, participation in decision-making, and recognition of rights, they aren’t even provided with information about the high dam?

Like Deepa, many other residents believed that developments such as increased electricity generation and access to irrigation could bring positive changes to their communities. They were open to such changes, perhaps even hoped for them—but not at the cost of their livelihoods, homes, traditional lands, and cultural practices, and especially not if they weren’t informed, provided with compensation that met their specific needs, and included in decision-making. Their interest in development may have been increasing, but without a truly participatory dialogue in which they were valued as active contributors, the residents were shrouded in fear and mistrust.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

As Pradeep Shrestha and I faced each other on a wooden bench in a tea stall in Barakhshetra, his first reaction when I mentioned the high dam had been to say, “Most of the people in this area are confused about the dam. Some people say that it will be very big; others say it will be small, but I heard that if the Koshi High Dam is built then there will be opportunities for water transportation like ships and boats, and during construction many local people will be employed in construction work. The dam will bring hydropower and we will get electricity to improve the load-shedding in Nepal. A road that is wide will be properly constructed.” Then he had set down his glass and said, “But another dimension of the dam is the possibility of explosion,” and continued to tell me how displacement, inadequate compensation and resettlement, and loss of the sacred temple were his community’s greatest fears. Later, after the tea was finished and his friends had left the shop, he said, “There may be benefits in terms of electricity and transportation, but it may also bring some disasters like landslides, soil erosion, water animals disappearing... If there are more benefits for the country despite the losses, we will agree, but the government should make sure that there is a special package for the displaced people. The government should study this in detail and analyze the benefits and losses... I may not directly benefit, but that is selfish!”

His words were reminiscent of what Arundhati Roy describes as “the greater common good” in her essay about the Narmada Dam²⁶--that in large-scale development projects such as the Saptakoshi Dam and many others before it, the rights of the marginalized communities are erased to protect the privileges of the

²⁶ Arundhati Roy’s essay entitled *The Greater Common Good* explains her opposition to the Narmada Dam in India and the failings of Indian democracy.

dominant few, and to uphold the nation's right to 'progress.' In spite of Pradeep's humility, the fact remains that the cost-benefit analysis that has typically been used to make decisions about dam projects since the 1950s is limited to the maximization of economic welfare, failing to include the social and environmental impacts of the projects²⁷. By understating the true costs of the project and overlooking the disparities of which populations gain and which lose, this kind of analysis is too narrow of a framework for evaluating large dam projects. It fails to recognize the human dimension of development and the destruction that these changes could cause to present and future generations. Of course, it is easier to overlook the human dimension when the most affected communities are also the most marginal.

The impoverishment of the communities who are affected and displaced by large dams is well understood by the Koshi residents, and especially by Kamal Bahadur Katwal and Devi Maya Khardka, who were victims of the 2008 Koshi Barrage flood and the resulting resettlement, loss of resources, marginalization, and social exclusion after the forced displacement that dissolved their community. Their story is one of dislocation, of being swept away and deposited like debris. They are working harder to build, to settle, to grow. They know all too well what it means to be disregarded by a government that promised to protect, compensate, and resettle them. They are environmental refugees—forced from their homes by embankments, floods, the consequences of development, and now living on the margins of society, fighting against what they've already experienced once. Nearly 30,000 families are still awaiting compensation, rehabilitation, and livelihood support from the government as

²⁷ World Commission on Dams. *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*. Earthscan, London (2000), p. 181.

they were promised²⁸. With the high dam, thousands more could soon be joining them.

The sun beat down on us as I sat with Kamal outside of his home, listening to him detailing the many failed water treaties that had affected his family. Flies hovered near our ears, humming softly. Kamal was telling me how the government had not followed through on its promises of compensation after the displacement caused by the final breaching of the Koshi Barrage.

“The Koshi Agreement between Nepal and India states that the people whose land was taken for the construction of the Koshi Barrage would be provided compensation by the Indian government as soon as possible, but they still have not received it. The compensation package for the flood said they would build a health post, school, and concrete road for our displaced community, but it has not been done. After the floods, the government only provided us with medicine for the diseases spread by the water. Other than that we still have gotten no compensation. At the time of construction, the Indian government took so many stones and wood from here but Nepal didn’t get any compensation. According to the agreement, the Indian government should maintain the two canals in Saptari and Sunkoshi [district and river], but they have now denied to do it. They started to do it, but then later handed the work over to the Nepali government. Later, an Indian company again came to reconstruct and maintain the canal, but they moved the intake point 1 km upstream. The level of the water intake changed and people feared that water wouldn’t sufficiently come to the canal, but the government didn’t listen to our voice. Right

²⁸ Dixit, Ajaya. “Kosi Embankment Breach in Nepal: Need for a Paradigm Shift in Responding to Floods.” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2009).

now, little water comes to the canal due to the high intake level. We are nearby, but there is load-shedding in the canal so the water doesn't come."²⁹

I had heard similar complaints from residents of other villages: that while many canals had been built in conjunction with previous Indian dam and embankment projects, they weren't properly maintained and were often no longer functional. Mohan Rai of Dhankuta district—one of the indigenous leaders and activists who I had met in Simli—had told me that the canals he knew of were always dry in the winter in Nepal, and that he believed all of the water was being transported to India instead. “The canals flow with water in the summer, but Nepali farmers don't need water in the summer,” he had said with a chuckle, referring to the torrential monsoon rains that drench the country from June to September every year.

These were just some of the experiences of institutional disregard for the local communities that contributed to their impoverishment as they dealt with the aftermath of large development projects. The stories point to the many ways that such projects systematically marginalize the already vulnerable populations, and how they routinely withdraw the support that they have promised, whether it be canal maintenance, infrastructure support in the resettlement communities, or material compensation. The experiences of Kamal, Mohan, and many others speak to a kind of institutional dysfunction in which the necessary services are not available or reliable, which limits the ability of the affected populations to adapt to the changes. In the case of water projects in Nepal like the Saptakoshi Dam, such institutional dysfunction is likely a result of the ongoing political instability in the country—which has been attempting

²⁹ Water is pumped electrically into the canals, meaning that it requires a constant supply of energy in order to flow. With the daily rolling blackouts in Nepal that become longer in the dry season, the canals cannot pump water through the system to reach the communities.

to draft a constitution since the monarchy was abolished in 2008 but has not yet succeeded—as well as the international nature of the water treaties. Through the residents’ stories, I began to see how having political stability as a prerequisite of development might be one way to ensure greater reliability of government services and promises.

Back in Mahendra Nagar village, as the humid air was beginning to thin, Kamal was explaining to me how he didn’t consider the irrigation and electricity to be benefits of the project when it was clear to him that they would not reach his community, or even most of the country. His assertions were strong, grounded in his experiences, his disappointments with the past projects, the ways his family had been treated and his community neglected. “A few hundred megawatts of electricity is little benefit compared to the losses,” he said sharply when I asked how he thought they might benefit from the dam. “Another benefit could be irrigation in Saptari, but how much water will come, really?” He looked past me now, at the flat expanse of farmland that stretched out beside his home, punctuated here and there by a goat or a woman bent double with her hands in the soil. “There are no more benefits for Nepal,” he said. “Only benefits taken by India.” For a moment he said nothing, watching the fields, his eyes fixed on something that I could not see. Then he looked back at me, and the corner of his lip curled into a smile as if he were about to tell a joke. “They are starting a new project to convince us Nepali people about the dam these days. India is starting a system of water transport from here to near the Ganga³⁰ to transport goods. But we must ask a question to the Indian government: even though

³⁰ The Ganges River, called the Ganga in Nepal and India

we have the seven rivers here, we don't have even one steamship or boat. If they build the dam and improve water transportation, how will we benefit from their boats?"

He laughed, but I wasn't sure if I should. I supposed the humour came from the reality of how different the lives and situations of the dam beneficiaries were from those who would be affected by it, and the idea of having boats when he was worrying about losing his home again seemed ridiculous. In truth, it was ridiculous, but I also knew it to be a real possibility. Before beginning my journey to the Koshi Basin and the riverside communities, I had met with a professor in Southeastern Nepal who studied the Saptakoshi River and who had been in contact with the dam project developers, collecting information about the dam that was being kept from the village communities and then compiling it into books and leaflets, sharing it with them and quietly fueling the resistance. We sat on the floor of his house amidst great stacks of books in a room that was completely white—the walls, the low table, the papery curtains that billowed in the morning breeze—and spoke about the project, its effects, and the ongoing resistance. From him, I learned that the project planners were hoping to turn the village areas into a tourist site after building the dam, complete with water attractions and transportation. Community residents who were aware of this idea considered it to be exclusionary, believing that they would not benefit from tourism and transportation, but rather would be further marginalized and isolated by such a change. As Ranabattrra Rai, in the tea stall in Barahkshetra, had told me, “Some rich people may gain benefits from the dam. They can run water transportation, restaurants, and the tourism business here. But the poor people do not

have enough capital to invest in those industries, so we will remain poor. The dam may be positive for rich people, but it will be very harmful for poor people.”

The idea of establishing a tourism site around the dam is an example of a development goal that is not mutually beneficial to the government and the local communities. It is an idea that does not meet the needs of the communities and is more likely to result in the further displacement and cultural alienation of the indigenous groups in the hills. It once again brings up the importance of dialogue, of listening to the specific demands and responding to the needs of the local communities to work towards a kind of development that is mutually beneficial. The professor, who jointly owned a farm in one of the downstream villages, periodically held activist meetings there for those who were engaging in the resistance, sharing information and supporting the village residents in their fight. His devotion and support was inspiring and, truthfully, necessary, but I couldn't help but feel angered by the fact that he was the one providing the information to the communities—and under cover, no less—rather than the project developers themselves.

Without direct contact with the project planners and government officials, the residents of the Koshi Basin villages will not have the opportunity to share their concerns, ideas, and demands and to ensure that their existence is being considered as the project moves forward. Coming from communities that have less political and social power—indigenous groups and cultural minorities—the residents have less ability to make their demands heard by the decision-makers. The exclusion of the local communities from negotiation means that the social, cultural, and ecological importance of the river to these groups will not be considered. Instead, the project is

being imposed in a way that creates a power dynamic in which the project experts and government committees, such as the Saptakoshi Joint Commissions Offices, make the decisions while excluding the perspectives of those who will be implicated by the dam.

By failing to initiate dialogue with the Koshi Basin communities as well as maintaining little transparency in the decision-making process, the government is exploiting the hierarchical power structure while ignoring the local context, which is creating a sense of desperation among the people as they resort to direct action resistance measures. And they plan to keep resisting until “the actions of the government will stop,” as stated by Krishna Bhattarai, the coordinator of the Struggle Committee forum that I attended in Dharan.

The fact that these communities have had little chance to voice their concerns has not stopped them from creating demands. Each place I went, I was told about a different kind of compensation that the residents would require in order to consider the dam project. As we sat in the shade of a small cloth awning outside Sir Mukhya’s home, he told me how above all, he and his community needed a clear understanding of the kind of resettlement they would be given, including the amount of land, the location, and the facilities such as electricity, drinking water, and schools. “If the government decides to build the dam, they must make all the provisions of settlement and displacement clear beforehand,” he said, glancing sideways into the open door of his house from where a child was cooing. Displacement, I found, was the deepest fear in the communities by the river. People would speak willingly about their desire for developments, their interest in certain positive changes that the dam could bring, but

when it came to the possibility of being forcefully displaced to make room for these improvements, the interest shifted to fear, sadness, anger, and to a profound sense of unease that lingered long after our conversations were over. This, I learned, was a bottom line: that while they wanted change, they needed security—as we all do—in their land, their homes, their natural and built environment. The benefits appeared less glamorous when they were tarnished with the costs of leaving.

As Devi Maya Khardka and I spoke outside her resettlement home, surrounded by neighbours and family members who seemed ashen as she listed everything they had lost in the floods, she told me that she and the other farmers from her community, which relies on subsistence agriculture like many indigenous groups in Nepal, had agreed that they need a significant amount of productive land as compensation. “The government should replace our land. We want land in another area that is as fertile as ours was,” she said slowly, wringing her calloused hands. Pradeep Shrestha of Barakhshetra cited the need for livelihood opportunities and help with income generation if they were to be resettled. “If we have to leave here, will there be an alternative way of making our livelihoods? What will it be?” he asked. He was highlighting an important point that the government must focus on the social and economic development of the displaced groups, and not just their physical relocation. For these farming communities, the loss of farmland without relocation to another fertile area—and the likelihood of being forced to settle in a resource-depleted area due to erosion and degradation from the dam—will lead to their impoverishment, and might even force them to abandon the resettlement area in search of better land. While a resettlement plan might provide the displaced communities with land, it does

not guarantee that they will receive fertile soil. The traditional farming practices of these communities involve methods of soil cultivation that restore the nutrients and enhance the quality of the land, which has been producing crops for thousands of years. If moved to a resettlement area, however, they will most likely be given not soil, but dirt, which could take decades to form into productive soil for farming. Providing infrastructure and basic necessities such as health services and electricity at the resettlement sites are also essential to the stability of the displaced groups, and yet these services are often inadequate or absent, even when accounted for in the compensation package³¹.

After the Saptakoshi People's Rights Forum, as Rabin and I sat side by side in scuffed plastic chairs, talking about land and monetary compensation, he mentioned that the people were demanding compensation at the market rate rather than the government rate, which is much lower. "In Nepal the government rate is low but the market rate is high. According to the government rate, one hectare of land is valued at 20,000 Nepali rupees maybe, but in the market it would be valued at 1 *lakh* (100,000 Nepali rupees). The irrigation system might make the land productive, but with the government compensation system, we will hardly get any land or money for animals and crops," he explained. In what Rabin was describing as a flawed and discriminatory system, the scale of the displacement and loss from the dam will likely make adequate compensation and resettlement even more difficult.

If the true costs of the dam are to be considered, then the social and spiritual loss of the cherished Barakhshetra *mandir* just below the dam site, the many holy

³¹ World Commission on Dams. *Dams and Development: A New Framework for Decision-Making*. Earthscan, London (2000), p.107.

sites along the river, and the damage to the sacred river itself must all be accounted for. When I first visited the temple in early April, I noticed how it dangles over the river like a jewel in the mountainside, how the stairs leading down to the water seemed to strain under the weight of the thousands of pilgrims on the last leg of their journey. As I descended from the temple until the stairs gave way to sand, and sand gave way to water, I saw people of every age gliding into the river, small boys with fistfuls of rice and flowers, grandmothers whose soaked cotton saris clung to their bodies, parents pouring handfuls of sacred water over their babies' heads, smoothing down their hair, praying for their health. It was unfathomable that all of this could soon be lost. Ranabattrai Rai of the Barakhshetra village had voiced his demand for a replacement in the new resettlement area. "We need our temple nearby like we have here," he said. Still, many others made it clear to me that there could be no such replacement: that a sacred site, once lost, was irreplaceable; that no amount of land, compensation, or revisions to the Indo-Nepal water treaties could bring back the spirit of the gods, the river, and the people who believed.

"A few hundred megawatts of electricity is little benefit compared to the losses," said Kamal Bahadur Katwal.

"From an environmental, social, and cultural perspective, it will be hard to adjust to a new environment. This does not compare with compensation," said Chatara Maya Shrestha.

"What will happen to this place if the dam is built? If its beauty is lost, we cannot compare this loss to the benefits of the dam," said Pradeep Shrestha.

Again and again I hear: *nothing compares.*

Three hours into the Saptakoshi People's Rights Forum, and the air was heavy with the struggles of the twenty men and the communities they represented that were all fighting against the high dam. The sun was high in the clear sky, at the peak point that it reaches before dropping down silently into the night. Inside the room, the Struggle Committee members were becoming restless, as if they were itching to put into action the plans that they were forming, or perhaps just to go home and share a meal with their families. One man was standing in the corner of the room, speaking into his cellphone; another, one of the older men, had removed his glasses and was rubbing his thumbs over the indents they had left on his nose. There was a kind of friction in the atmosphere, and it was growing.

Krishna, the coordinator of the group, stood. His eye sockets were sunken deeply into his face and a layer of sweat dappled his hairline. He placed his notes on the table, folded his hands, and addressed the room. "Regarding the high dam: when we escalate our resistance, the government's actions will stop, and when we stop our resistance, the government's actions will restart. It has been like this for five years."

His words carried weight, and he paused. For the last few years, the resistance efforts have increased in the riverside communities, with local residents disturbing the Detailed Project Report surveyors and defacing some of the construction equipment, demanding that the surveyors study the cultural, social, and environmental impacts of the dam rather than merely performing a physical study of the site. In response to these actions, the government has repeatedly postponed the completion of the DPR, and it still has yet to be completed, particularly as a result of obstructions by the

Maoist-affiliated Limbuwan and Kirati Rashtriya Mukti Morcha political groups that threatened to hold massive strikes if the DPR was not stopped and the Saptakoshi Dam treaty was not revised³². These Maoist-affiliated groups in Nepal, which are also ethnic and indigenous parties, have demanded that the DPR be postponed until Nepal is restructured into a federal republic in which the people and their representatives can control the project. While their actions appear to be in support of the common and minority people's struggle, the involvement of the Maoists in the dam resistance movement could lead to potential future conflicts due to their support of secularism in contrast to the local communities' religious and spiritual values and their desire to preserve their sacred sites. Still, under the Maoist parties' pressure, The DPR was stopped temporarily, but the treaty has not been revised, nor have the local groups been involved in discussion with the government.

“The government of Nepal has allowed the people to sit in on discussions only a few times, and they always leave without reaching conclusions. The government has not even offered to provide compensation or resettlement. The main initiative to communicate with the people has to come from the government, but they haven't made a plan to do so because they don't want to settle our issues. The people's demand is increasing but the government is not taking responsibility,” Krishna continued.

There was a stirring in the room. I sensed that Krishna had just voiced the root of the issue that this committee was trying to tackle: their exclusion from the process of development. Their efforts were escalating, but they needed to be met in dialogue

³² Shaurabh. “Issue Brief: Re-examining the Indo-Nepal Saptakoshi Dam Project.” Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi (2012).

to begin to resolve the dam project's many issues. The people were working to spread the information they had, to raise awareness about the high dam and to gain support—but without being included in discussion, their access to information is severely limited, leaving them unable to make an informed decision and give their consent. The project developers are maintaining a veil of privacy that keeps out the affected communities, and the little information about the dam that is publicly available is found in English on the Internet, making it inaccessible to these groups. These communities are compiling lists of specific demands for compensation, deciding what kind of resettlement program they would need to comply with the project, but if no one is listening to their needs, how can they be met? Their connection to the area and their sociocultural priorities are being ignored, which furthers their sense of distrust towards the government and increases the climate of fear and uncertainty among them. They are being excluded, their needs disregarded, and they are aware of it. Knowing this only spurs on their struggle to be heard.

In addition to their demands for compensation and resettlement, many of the residents proposed alternatives to the high dam project in the interest of improving their communities while also preserving their homes and way of life. Several community activists and residents suggested the alternative of building a series of smaller dams along different rivers rather than one multipurpose high dam on the Saptakoshi River. While the common belief is that small dams can provide the benefits of electricity and irrigation without causing the same scale of social and environmental destruction, this is not the reality. Studies have shown that small dams have comparable and often greater environmental impacts than large dams,

particularly in terms of habitat loss, damage to fish stocks, and hydrologic change, and especially when the effects accumulate through multiple dam sites³³. Still, decisions about small hydropower projects are often made at a more regional level rather than in the central government or on an international scale, allowing for more local participation and management. Although this proposal has its issues, it brings to light the fact that these communities have their own development priorities and are looking to find alternate ways of reaching these goals through projects that allow for community involvement and design.

A recent report released by the International Accountability Project (IAP) called *Back to Development—A Call for What Development Could Be* studied communities in eight countries that were responding to unwanted development projects such as dams, mines, and power plants. They document how development can be improved by local expertise and how the local communities should be “full partners in the development process”³⁴. The study shows that the local findings in each country are actually universal when compiled: for instance, that 82% of all of the people surveyed say that “their idea of development was different from the government’s idea of development” and 88% “were not consulted during the planning phase of the development project”³⁵. The study ends with a set of eight global recommendations to improve development, including the suggestion to begin with a ‘People’s Plan’ to decide on development priorities and to have community-led

³³ Kibler, K. M., and D. D. Tullos, “Cumulative Biophysical Impact of Small and Large Hydropower Development in Nu River, China, *Water Resour. Res.*, 49, 3104–3118, (2013).

³⁴ Levitt, J. and Schlieff, R. *Back to Development: A Call for What Development Could Be*. International Accountability Project (2015), p.9.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 81-84.

research and consultations as a key component of the planning process. The formation of the Struggle Committees and the many demands and proposals for change that I heard are strong indicators that the communities by the Koshi also have their own ideas of development and want to be consulted by the project developers and involved in the planning process.

Sushila Adhikari, one of the farmers whom I had met in Prakasapur, suggested as another alternative that an early warning system for rising water levels, with a function that could disseminate the information to the local communities, be implemented as a means of improving the area's resilience to flooding. Her proposal came from her own experiences and, with the addition of a water diversion system for the rain and glacial melt waters, could become the start of a community-led flood management program that would meet the government's goal of controlling flooding downstream while also receiving support from the community. Her alternative solution brings forth the idea of involving locals in the planning process in a participatory approach that not only consults the affected communities, but also makes use of their local knowledge, addresses their needs, and uses their input to decide upon the development priorities of the country. This, perhaps, is what development could be: a process of bringing about changes that improve rather than harm the lives of the people, and that is shaped by the communities who will be affected. In this way, local knowledge, ideas, and expertise could become a part of the project design, transforming development into something that is beneficial to and driven by the communities, and not an imposed project that takes away livelihoods, fragments cultures, impoverishes communities and disempowers entire populations.

The IAP report exposes how members of the local populations have knowledge and expertise about their human and natural surroundings and recommends using this knowledge to improve the project design and identify potential issues. Before suggesting her alternative, Sushila had looked out past the schoolhouse and said, “After the floods, our roads were blocked and our village suffered. The Koshi Barrage was meant to control the Koshi and divert water to India, but in the rainy season it causes floods and erosion instead. Our people become worried whenever the water level is high, and we are always worried about more disasters to come.” Her experience with past water projects and her understanding of the river gives her and so many others in her position a kind of foresight that, if used to inform future project designs, could help prevent harm and improve the process of change.

Their words inspire the possibility of what development truly could be: inclusive, desirable, and above all, dedicated to improving lives. To the communities by the Koshi Basin, *bikas* (development) is a word that, in their lives, has meant sacrifice, loss, and destruction. It has meant forced displacement and living in fear, has justified the government taking their ancestral lands. It has made them invisible, pushed them to the margins, or expected them to be sacrificed for the greater good of the nation. It conjures up images of their sacred river being bottled up, their temple destroyed, their faith broken. Their lives have become a form of resistance, and many of them are dedicating themselves to this fight—the fight to be heard, to be recognized, and to be valued.

“They aren’t listening,” said Kamal Bahadur Katwal.

“Listen,” said Sir Mukhya.

“Listen now,” said Maya Thapa.

Listen, now.

A river is always changing. It is constantly moving, flowing across boundaries, carrying silt and minerals, waste and animals. It sculpts the earth’s landscape, erodes the bedrock and the valley, deepens, widens, changes its course over time. It transforms, and it carries on. It shapes what it can and moves what it must. It never stops. If you listen to it, you can hear its rumbling power; step inside and you feel its pull, its strength.

It is never still, and it will not rest.

Epilogue

I stood near the bridge to Barakhshetra beneath a blood red sky. April, and my time on the Koshi, was coming to a close. On the other side of the river, pilgrims clustered near the edge of the water, dipping their heads, washing their arms, murmuring prayers, the intense colours of their clothes making them seem like tiny flower petals collecting by the shore. On this side of the river, two women were climbing up the cliff, one carrying a bundle of freshly washed clothes, the other weaving her newly washed hair into a thick braid. Before I realized I was moving, I had slipped past them, tracing their path down the hill, as if my entire body were thirsty. I stepped over broken glass, a chewed black flip-flop, brittle fragments of clothing snatched by the current. “Be careful, sister!” a man called out. I looked over my shoulder, saw him waving his arms above his head from the side of his house that overlooked the river, and felt a word stir on my tongue: trust. I realized something then, as I stumbled down the rock until it gave way to sand. The issue was not just a lack of trust between India and Nepal, nor between the government and the communities. It was a people losing trust in their river. This water, land, air, relied on by all those who live here, is about to change, to transform in ways that they are trying to anticipate but cannot imagine. Their foundation—physical, spiritual—is about to be shaken, and with it, their faith. The dam, development, the unrelenting, ever-advancing force, is taking away something ancient, breaking something ingrained, rupturing an understanding that is embedded in generations. It is terrifying in its strength, its power to devastate, but even more terrifying in what it aims to generate: Persuasion. Belief that this is the best path, and that it should continue.

Assurance from all those affected that they will not lose, because something greater will be gained. To splinter trust in something so innate, the force of development proves that it is right.

I stripped off my shoes, rolled up my pants, and sunk into the water. I let it lap at my knees, blot the hem of my *kurta*. This river that feeds, quenches, cleans, soothes, yields, swallows, destroys, creates. This river, mother, goddess. This river.

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LRB/ IRB Action Form
Cover Sheet for Review of Research with Human Subjects
World Learning, Brattleboro, VT 05301

Name of Student: *Pratik Oza*
Title of ISP Proposed Research: *Reading to the extent that might affect the proposed*
Study Abroad Program: *Replabent, Everest, Nepal*
Name of Academic Director: *Barbara Robinson*
Names of LRB Members: *Robinson, Chandra, Pratik*

Identifying project number _____

ACTION TAKEN: Form below for AD/LRB/IRB use only

Research exempt from federal regulations. Action taken:

approved as submitted approved pending revisions
 requires expedited review requires full IRB review not approved

Research Expedited Review. Action taken:

approved as submitted approved pending revisions
 requires full IRB review not approved

Research requiring Full IRB review. Action taken:

approved as submitted approved pending submission or revisions not approved

[Signature]

LRB/IRB Chairperson's Signature

4-4-14

RECEIVED

03 APR 2014

[Signature]

LRB/IRB Member's Signature

Date

