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In Pursuit of Shiva

"This place is not meant for people." Men who lived and worked in Kedarnath would often express this sentiment to me. I would remember these words at odd moments when, during my time in Kedarnath, the remoteness of the place would suddenly strike me. These moments often happened when I was waiting in line to enter the temple. In the years just before the floods, it was sometimes necessary in the morning to wait for several hours in line for the chance to enter the temple and come face to face with the self-manifest rock form of Shiva around which the temple had somehow been built out of massive stone blocks high up in the Himalaya. This time spent waiting in line was many things: a chance to talk to *yatris*, the opportunity to observe the spectacle of pilgrimage tourism from a ringside seat, an embodied push for me and my cold feet to think about why I had come to this place and what I was trying to do.

Once while in line I remember looking into one of the shops that surrounded the temple on three sides and seeing that a film was playing on a small television. On the screen, hanging above a counter full of metal trays containing materials (Hindi: *prasad*) that would be used in ritual worship (Hindi: *puja*) in the temple, next to a few benches where one could sit and take chai and biscuits, I saw the Pandava princes and their wife Draupadi making their way up into the Himalaya, struggling along on their famous ascent to heaven. The scene reminded me that one of the most famous stories about Kedarnath connects to narrative material that in Sanskrit versions of the *Mahabharata* epic is found in the Chapter of the Great Departure (Sanskrit: *Mahaprasthanika Parva*) and the chapter of the Climb to Heaven (Sanskrit: *Svargarohana*). In many ways those who find themselves in Kedarnath are walking in the footsteps of the Pandavas. Kedarnath is bound up

with a story about trying to leave the world behind, a story that in many versions includes eventually walking out of the living world on what is known as the Great Path (Sanskrit: *Mahapatha*; Hindi: *Mahapath/Mahapanth*). Yet at the same time it is a place that forces humans to reckon with their place in the broader world, where the eco-sociality of human life becomes obvious. It is a transition zone. This journey of the Pandavas up into the Himalaya is also, more broadly, one of the most important stories connected to the Land of the Gods (Hindi: Dev Bhumi), a recent popular designation for the Garhwal region of Uttarakhand. This label has, in recent years, come to serve as a brand identity for the region, although like many features of the geographic imaginaire that connect to stories of Hindu deities and their actions in the world, it sounds unique to the region, yet is in fact not unique.[1] The neighboring state of Himachal Pradesh has found its way to the same designation.[2]

Accounts of the Great Departure of the Pandavas offer important but confusing lessons about how humans should act in the world—they provide a narrative framework for thinking through ethical commitments, and in this way these stories function as a microcosm of the *Mahabharata* story in general. While living in Kedarnath, I came to realize that a careful study of the dynamics of the line to enter the temple touched on similarly complicated and crucial issues, namely the relationship between the purity of one's aims and the nature of the end achieved. Thus, as a way of introducing the social and spatio-temporal worlds of Kedarnath, I want to show how narratives about the arrival of the Pandavas in Kedarnath help us see how the social, moral, and theological issues raised by the dynamics of the line (or queue) can serve as a general introduction to Kedarnath as it was in the several years before the disaster. In this chapter I will therefore first briefly describe Kedarnath village, relate and contextualize an oral version of one of the most famous foundation stories of Kedarnath that involves the Pandavas, and then discuss how waiting in line in Kedarnath analytically functions as a window into both the place as a whole and my position in that place. As I came to understand, to have any sort of involvement with Kedarnath in which the stories of the Pandavas figured prominently was to stand in a place framed by the closeness of the end of life, the hyperpresence of an aloof god, and the challenges built into the human pursuit of virtue.

THE SHAPE OF THE PLACE

When I stood in line for the temple in Kedarnath, I, like most visitors, looked out over the village and remembered the journey that had brought me to this moment in space and time. I will use my memories of this view as a springboard for a brief introduction to the place of Kedarnath. This description, like the opening *devdarshini* vignette, remembers the scene as it was before 2013. The layout of the

village is different today. The path from Gaurikund to Kedarnath used to wend its way up the western bank of the Mandakini River valley to the end-valley where Kedarnath is located. The river valley was formed by several advances and subsequent retreats of the Chorabari glacier, a mass of ice and rock that lies today just behind Kedarnath village, between the village and the high Himalayan mountains just beyond to the north (Chaujar 2009; Mehta et al. 2012). With every kilometer of the approach to Kedarnath it was possible to feel the imprint of the glacier. The tree line passed, the lines of the surrounding valley walls began to feel just slightly aquatic and the bare bones of the mountains emerged. Usually at the beginning of the season (which often falls in May) the winter snow had not completely melted, and the second seven of the fourteen kilometers passed through snowbanks. At *devdarshini* the ascent lessened and the narrow river valley opened out into a wide, open split-level moraine framed by the glacier behind and mountains on either side. Diana Eck (2012, 228–29) describes the journey in this way:

> Pilgrims strike out early in the morning to walk the steep trail over ten miles to Kedāra. Finding their own pace, they stretch out along the trail—ponies in the lead, followed by pedestrian pilgrims both with and without shoes, and four-man *dhoolies* carrying the elderly or infirm. There are white-clad widows in tennis shoes, their walking sticks an absolute necessity, some making their way slowly with one stick in each hand. There are Rajasthani women in bright skirts and thick silver anklets, walking barefoot. They are robust old men wearing jackets and woolen mufflers, with porters carrying their gear; and there are scantily clad *sannyāsīs* carrying nothing but a water pot and a bowl. Parties of pilgrims from Gujarat and Karnataka mingle with families from Maharashtra and schoolgirls from Bengal. They cross high snowfields and marvel at the snow. For most, it is the first snow they have ever seen.

Before Kedarnath proper I used to arrive into what was called the horse camp (Hindi: *ghora parav*), a milling confusion of riders attempting to mount and dismount, passengers entering and exiting sedan chairs, mud and horse urine, chai stalls, and, for a month in 2007, a temporary cyber-cafe. If you needed to shave your head in order to observe *shraddh* (Hindi: the rituals of ancestor worship), it was here that you would have had a barber do it before you entered officially into Kedarnath. Directly parallel to these last two kilometers on the eastern bank of the Mandakini was the helicopter area with two landing pads shared, in 2008, among at least six different helicopter companies. *Yatris* reaching Kedarnath on the path would look across the river to see *yatris* arriving by helicopter, for many the first time they were seeing a helicopter up close. Up on the edge of a side valley to the east in good weather one could see the rocky outcropping, flags, and tridents of the shrine to Bhukund Bhairavnath, the guardian deity of Kedarnath. To the west, on the slope of the valley side, a stream powered the electric generator that supplied

the electricity for the buildings of the Badrinath-Kedarnath Temples Committee (hereafter referred to as "the Samiti," Hindi for "committee" or "association") and the government. The rest of the village was on a separate power grid that depended on electric wires that ran up from Gaurikund.

After the horse camp, the path crossed the Mandakini River on a sturdy metal bridge. Just after crossing, many, though not all, would take a moment to purify themselves with a bath at the bathing steps (Hindi: *ghat*) on the Kedarnath side of the freezing waters of the river. Since 2013, as part of a massive postflood reconstruction effort, the bathing *ghat* has been completely rebuilt and enlarged. Then the path forked, on the left turning up into a collection of lodges and *dharamshalas* (Hindi: pilgrim guesthouses), starting with Maharashtra Mandal. The main fork of the path to the right wound steeply up and curved around in an s-shape until the beginning of the main bazaar was reached and the Kali Kamli *dharamshala* lay on the right. At this point the temple could be seen straight ahead and higher up at the other end of the bazaar. I often stopped at this point for a moment. *Chai* stalls and *dhabas* (Hindi: open-air restaurants) were found here, but the majority of the real estate looking onto the bazaar was held by shops selling the material objects connected to Hindu pilgrimage in the Himalaya: warm clothing, snacks and staples, materials for *puja,* books and pamphlets about Kedarnath and many related and standard North Indian religious Hindu topics, prayer beads made from the seeds of the Eye-of Shiva tree (Hindi: *Rudraksh*), containers for water from the Mandakini, small *lingas,* plants useful for Ayurvedic treatments (particularly those of potent Himalayan provenance), and most visibly thousands of images of Kedarnath, Shiva, the Uttarakhand Char Dham, and other North Indian Hindu religious staples such as Vishnu, Krishna, and Durga. When I noticed the Ayurvedic plants I remembered the famous biodiversity of Himalayan flora. Sometimes I would recall the moment in the *Ramayana* when Hanuman flies to the Himalaya to find the magical life-restoring plants that will help to save the wounded Lakshman and, uncertain which plants to bring, carries back an entire mountain. About halfway through the bazaar on the western side one saw the building that had been built over the water tank of Udaka (Hindi: Udak Kund), whose water was often connected to a famous Sanskrit verse: "When one has drunk the water of Kedara, rebirth does not occur." Just beyond Udak Kund was a small Goddess temple. At the end of the bazaar a flight of steps led up to the raised temple courtyard, where the triangular mountain-shape of the temple forced itself up into the sky. If I was acting like a typical Kedarnath visitor, I would celebrate having reached my goal. I would ring the bells hanging over the entrance to the courtyard at the top of the stairs. Sometimes I would just "take *darshan*" (Hindi: *darshan lena,* the interactive visual encounter of devotee and deity) of the temple from a distance and then, fatigued, go to my room to rest for a time. At the beginning of the season in 2014 there was so much mud, a year after the flooding,

that the stairs were still buried and the path through the mostly ruined bazaar led straight into the newly pristine temple courtyard.

Behind the temple to the northeast were, and are, the residential quarters of the Samiti, the *pujaris* (Hindi: ritual specialists tasked with the daily worship of temple deities) and the police, as well as two cell phone towers. To the northwest behind the temple were several more *dharamshalas,* most notably Bharatsevashram, a monument and adjacent hall dedicated to the famous philosopher Shankaracharya, and the free food kitchen (Hindi: *langar*) and ashram of the renunciant Mahant Chandragiri, adjacent to a railway reservation office that in 2007 was still under construction. Mahant Chandragiri's ashram was a place where free food and a place to sleep were always available whether you were a renunciant, a Russian Shiva devotee, or an American graduate student. Bharatsevashram, which was, and is, part of a national organization founded by Bengali guru Swami Pranavananda, was used primarily by Bengalis and tour groups from Gujarat. The line for the temple ran next to Bharatsevashram for much of its length. To the immediate east and northeast of the temple were the offices of the Samiti, where *yatris* could buy tickets for special *pujas* and seating inside the temple during evening worship offering light and songs to deities (Hindi: *arati*). Again moving eastward, the Samiti had built a large cloakroom for the storage of belongings and a public auditorium to host events such as, in 2007, a recitation of the Sanskrit text of the *Shiva Purana* and a concert by the famous Garhwali singer Narendra Singh Negi. Just by this auditorium lay the Swan Water Tank (Hindi: Hams Kund, a water reservoir linked to a story in which the deity Brahma assumed the form of a swan), the location in Kedarnath for *shraddh* rituals. At a somewhat further remove on the western and northwestern side of Kedarnath were the small glacial lakes of Vasuki Tal (up and to the west) and Gandhi Sarovar, or Chorabari Tal, as it was known locally (up and to the northwest). Many intrepid *yatris* used go to Gandhi Sarovar; one could walk there and back in half a day. A hardy few went to Vasuki Tal. One older route to Kedarnath, used by *yatris* coming on foot from Gangotri, proceeded from Triyugi Narayan to Kedarnath via Vasuki Tal. Some survivors of the flooding in 2013 escaped this way. "Brahma's Cave" (Hindi: *Brahma-gufa*) reputedly lies near Gandhi Sarovar. To the northeast of the temple reputedly lies the valley entrance to the Great Path, and near it, according to legend, stands the rock of Bhrigutirtha (also known as Bhairav Jhamp), from which devotees once jumped as a way of transitioning out of life. When the floods inundated Kedarnath in 2013, much of the water and debris came from Gandhi Sarovar.

When I would wait in line in the morning in 2007 in the high season, the line usually stretched back to the northwest of the temple, past the Shankaracharya Samadhi monument that commemorates the putative visit of one of India's most famous philosophical theologians and religious leaders, the philosopher Shankara. It extended past the Bharatsevashram *dharamshala,* the most popular destination

FIGURE 5. Waiting in line, with many one-use plastic raincoats attesting to recent rain. Temporary tents belonging to several renunciants can be seen to the left of the queue, with Mahant Chandragiri's free food kitchen directly behind and a cell tower off to the right.

in Kedarnath for the groups of Bengalis who visited, most often during the Durga Puja festival season in the fall. It curved past Mahant Chandragiri's *langar*. Even at its busiest, the line did not quite reach the two cell phone towers whose markedly well-constructed material modernity marked the northern edge of the village. To wait in this line, you would need to be ready for several hours of cold, numb feet.

Standing in line was a good way to encounter, in one visual sweep, almost all of the diverse social worlds that overlap in the Kedarnath of recent times. I saw groups of *yatris* arriving up through the market. Some had come by foot from the trailhead at Gaurikund, while others had ridden on a pony or been carried up in a sedan chair. Increasing numbers of *yatris* had been arriving by helicopter. Visitors in Kedarnath were usually Hindus from all walks of life who either were from Uttarakhand or had journeyed to the Land of the Gods from all over India and Nepal, though the majority were visitors from North India who were visiting Kedarnath as part of the Uttarakhand Char Dham Yatra. Increasingly *yatris* were arriving in Kedarnath ready to pay, in the high season, over one thousand rupees per night for a room, ten or fifteen rupees for a chai, and between fifty and one hundred rupees for a hot meal. The many who arrived in Kedarnath with fewer resources, such as a village group from Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan on a once-in-a-lifetime *yatra*, had to make do with lesser options. Some were clearly in happy shock at finding themselves in such a place, while others were physically and mentally overwhelmed, ready to find where they would be staying and get oriented. Four-man porter teams carrying their passengers in palanquins would sometimes carry their charges all the way up the main road of the marketplace. Renunciants, most but not all of whom were men, sat at various points alongside the queue or in the temple courtyard or in and around the shops and smaller alleys that partially surrounded the temple. Some were permanent and semipermanent fixtures who came every year for part or all of the season. Others were passing through and would stay for a few days before moving on to their next temporary destination. Wearing few clothes, often smeared with ashes, they were the human icons of Shiva in his place. They received, and often demanded, donations in exchange for blessings.

Kedarnath *tirth purohits* (Hindi: pilgrimage priests, also known in Hindi as *panda* or the more formal but less used *tirth-guru*, pilgrimage guru) would often approach the line to offer their services as ritual specialists to those who had not already connected with their ancestral pilgrimage priest upon arrival in Kedarnath. These individuals have the hereditary job and right to host those who have come to a *tirtha* or *dham* on *yatra,* perform rituals on their behalf, and collect payment for those services. Traditionally, part of what a *tirth purohit* does is to offer his patron (Hindi: *yajman*) an introduction to the place that includes a description of how a particular god or goddess came to be present in the place and what

the *yajman* needs to know about what should be offered in the temple or other place-specific ritual details, when to wake up in the morning, and when to depart in order to take best advantage of rapidly changing weather.

Kedarnath *tirth purohits* live in roughly three areas in the Kedarnath valley. The first and most socially central is the Bamsu area just south of Guptkashi, the area that traditionally belongs to a demon (Hindi: *rakshas*) devotee of Shiva named Banasur.[3] The second is from just north of Guptkashi up to Fata (from Nala to Fata on the map, including villages not on the map such as Khat and Rudrapur). Fata is the high-water mark for how far north into the Kedarnath valley the *tirth purohit* families reside. The third group of *tirth purohits* live on the other side of the Mandakini River in and around Ukhimath. Kedarnath *tirth purohits* count them-selves as descended from an original group of 360 families, or the "three-sixty."[4] Semwal, Bagwari, Shukla, Sharma, Avasthi, Posti, Tiwari, Shastri, Lalmohariya, Jugran, Kapruwan, Purohit, Kotiyal, Vajpai (Vajpayee), and Trivedi are their main family names. Different families (and subdivisions within families) maintain relationships with specific groups of *yatris* (constituted by a combination of region, usually a North Indian region, and caste group). Particular *tirth purohit* families have historical relationships with, for example, specific Marwari families from Rajasthan, certain villages in the greater Allahabad area, a particular district in Rajasthan, or particular groups from Himachal or Jammu-Kashmir. However, since these are historical relationships, the same Marwari family might live in Mumbai or Calcutta, or those from the Alwar district in Rajasthan might reside in Patna or Pune.

Often renunciants would make their temporary homes near the line that formed for the temple and would ask *yatris* for donations as they approached the temple. A few more established renunciants would take up specific positions in the temple courtyard every day. James Lochtefeld has observed that more renunciants were found at Kedarnath than at other shrines such as Badrinath and that their presence at the site was in spatial and social terms more central.[5] Sister Nivedita (1928, 43–44) made a similar observation in her visit almost a century previously. Even when they behaved in ways that other Kedarnath residents and *yatris* found inappropriate (fighting, requesting donations too aggressively), renunciants were given an extreme degree of latitude in Kedarnath because they essentially appeared as forms of Shiva (garbed as anthropomorphic Shivas) in the place of Shiva. Both through observation and in fragmentary conversations over the course of the season, I realized that for many *sadhus* in Kedarnath the most important and foundational religious practice was simply staying in Kedarnath itself rather than spending a great deal of time in the temple. For the renunciants who found the bustle of Kedarnath a challenge for their goals of a quiet and inwardly focused residence, there was (and is) a Ramanandi ashram two kilometers south of Kedarnath, just below *devdarshini* at Garud Chatti.[6]

This ashram had a core community of several renunciants who even stayed in Garud Chatti through the winter, and it welcomed renunciants throughout the pilgrimage season as well.

Occasionally small groups of trekkers would arrive into the village, and sometimes I would be in line when they marched proudly past. Kedarnath has been a destination for trekkers of primarily South Asian (and often Bengali) origin whose sophisticated rucksacks, better footwear, and more weather-appropriate clothing mark them as distinctly different from other groups of visitors. I occasionally saw groups of Western trekkers, but nothing like the numbers who traveled to Gangotri and onward to the source of the Ganga in Gaumukh. The popularity of Uttarakhand as a destination for nature tourism has been a rapidly expanding segment of the pilgrimage tourism industry in recent decades. Skiing in Auli, rafting on the Ganga, walking in the Valley of Flowers, day trips from the hill station of Mussoorie—these have become well-known and popular activities in their own right that may be carried out as part of an Uttarakhand Char Dham Yatra or separately and can be found in Kedarnath as well. One of the primary missions of the Garhwal Regional Development Authority (Hindi: Garhwal Mandal Vikas Nigam or GMVN for short), which is part of the state tourism ministry, is to support these forms of pilgrimage and nature tourism by providing guides and appropriate lodging and support everywhere that sightseers might wish to go. In Kedarnath the GMVN was often where large groups of trekkers would stay because it was relatively easy to book the rooms in advance from outside the region and because the quality of the rooms and food closely matched their expectations.

As I inched closer to the temple, the line became a good vantage point from which to survey the commercial heart of Kedarnath—the main road of the bazaar. Some of these shops were owned by Kedarnath *tirth purohits*—not all Kedarnath *tirth purohits* who worked in Kedarnath performed *puja* for their patrons. There were also a number of businessmen who lived in Kedarnath during the season who were not *tirth purohits* and who did not perform *puja* for *yatris*. Many of the shopkeepers, merchants, restauranteurs, and lodge and *dharamshala* managers in Kedarnath were also from the Kedarnath valley but were not *tirth purohits*. They would have been from a different Garhwali Brahmin community or would have been from Rajput castes, known locally by the general umbrella term of *thakur*. Men from almost every village in the Kedarnath valley worked in and around Kedarnath during the pilgrimage season. That is one of the many reasons that the impact of the floods of 2013 was so terrible. Everyone had friends and relatives who were working in Kedarnath at the time. Even the most menial job connected to the pilgrimage industry paid better than most other available opportunities unless someone was employed by the government, the military, or the police. There was a definite cachet to working in Kedarnath itself. The tiniest retail

space in the Kedarnath village could easily provide comfortable living for a year. Kedarnath pulled people and money from all over the nation and all over the world.

On those days when I arrived at the front of the line in participant-observer *yatri* mode, I touched the feet of the Ganesha who stood outside the temple door and, with the assistance of a *tirth purohit,* offered a quick preliminary *puja.* At the doorway of the temple I was greeted by an employee of the Samiti whose job it was to note down the number of people in each *yatri* group and record each group's point of origin. This benign encounter with recordkeeping signaled an important feature of how social space worked in Kedarnath. The Samiti officially controlled the temple. Inside, Samiti officers maintained order in the line, and men with the title of Veda-reciter (Hindi: *Ved-pathi,* the designation of those Brahmin Samiti employees who did *puja* in the Kedarnath temple) sat or stood by their designated posts inside the temple, ready to perform the same ritual services offered by the Kedarnath *tirth purohits* but without the same necessity of negotiating a ritual fee, instead accepting donations that were given directly into a donation box. The Samiti, at its discretion, allowed people to enter by the side door and jump the line. The only others with the right to jump the queue were, by consensus, Kedarnath valley locals who worked in Kedarnath. During my time in Kedarnath it was clear that the Samiti had struck deals with particular helicopter companies—on many occasions if you arrived by helicopter you were treated as a VIP and you could enter the temple without waiting in line. VIP guests of particular Kedarnath *tirth purohits* did not receive the same privilege, which meant that the question of side-door entry became the focal point through which the broader tensions between *tirth purohits* and the Samiti were frequently expressed. There was litigation between the two groups about the rights of *tirth purohits* to collect fees for their services in the temple courtyard and the Samiti's ostensible abrogation of those rights, a legal point that stood in for deeper issues about who controlled what in Kedarnath. Once through the door you entered the antechamber of the temple and began to walk around Shiva's bull vehicle Nandi in the auspicious direction, taking *darshan* as you did so of Draupadi, Arjuna, Lakshmi-Narayan, Kunti Mata (the mother of the five Pandava brothers), and Yudhishthira. Then you crossed another threshold into the hallway leading to the inner shrine where Kedarnath-Shiva sat, the god embedded in and arising out of the mountain rock. You stepped through a final threshold and were in the inner sanctum, in the presence of the god. After *darshan* and, often, *puja*, you briefly worshipped Parvati in the hallway before exiting back to the antechamber, where you completed the circumambulation of Nandi and took *darshan* of the remaining Pandava brothers and Krishna before exiting through the side door and circumambulating the temple.

The temple used to close in the early to midafternoon so that the inner sanctum could be cleaned of the material from morning *pujas* and so that Shiva could be

offered food (Hindi: *bhog*) and could be worshipped with a fire ritual (Hindi: in this case *yagya havan,* or just *havan,* in which offerings are made into a fire while *mantras* from the Vedas and other Sanskrit verses are chanted). Once the temple closed for the afternoon, even the Garhwali deities who arrived on *yatra* with their villages, carried in palanquins or backpacks containing metal masks that served as the material embodiment of the traveling deity, had to wait. Such deity processions were a common and important feature of religious life in many Himalayan areas, most notably in Garhwal, the neighboring region of Kumaon, and the state of Himachal Pradesh. The deities traveled accompanied by their villagers, drums, and insignia (Garhwali: *nyauj-aur-nishan*) such as flags, and their arrival into the village was always an intense and exciting moment. After *bhog* the doors reopened in the late afternoon for *shringar arati* (the offering of fire, light, and music to the adorned [*shringar*] *linga*) and were worshipped with adornment and lighted oil lamps. At this time only the *pujari* and his assistant were allowed in the inner sanctum. A *pujari*'s job is to offer regular daily and festival worship to the deity/ deities of a temple regardless of whether devotees are present. It is not worship on the behalf of specific human devotees but rather worship that is an intrinsic part of the daily rhythms of the temple and that must be maintained as part of the ongoing human-divine relationships that center in a temple. The *pujaris* in Kedarnath were (and are) from the Shaiva denomination known today as Virashaiva and more specifically from the *jangama jati* class of a segment of the Virashaivas connected to the Five Teachers (Sanskrit: *panchacharya*) tradition.[7] This tradition's insti- tutional networks are based around five temple-centers (Hindi: *math*), one of them being Kedarnath, and five world teachers (Hindi: *jagatguru*), of whom the Kedarnath *jagatguru* (who also bears the title *rawal*) Bheemashankar Ling, who lives in Ukhimath, is one. His ordained students (Hindi: *cela*) serve as *pujaris* in Kedarnath.

THE ORIGINS OF THE GREATNESS OF KEDARNATH

For at least several centuries and potentially much longer, Kedarnath has been a place connected to a web of stories and ritual practices that involve Shiva's presence and absence, the human pursuit of God and self-perfection, the transition from life to death, and the imperfections built into being human and trying to act in ways that are just, righteous, and true to your own nature—that is to say, according to *dharma.* These stories and ritual practices are set in a location that bridges the world of humans to worlds beyond the human. Any specific telling of one version of a Kedarnath-related story eventually resonates with other parts of this web. Several intertwined and contextualized anecdotes will show what I mean.

On June 29, 2007, in Kedarnath, Bhupendra brought a Kedarnath pilgrimage priest whom I will call Tiwari-Ji to our shared room. Unlike many people with

whom I had had conversations only because of my own or Bhupendra's persistent effort, Tiwari-Ji sought us out. He found Bhupendra in the bazaar and told him that he would like to meet with me to make sure that I had the correct understanding of the origins of Kedarnath. Bhupendra brought him to our room and we recorded the conversation. The following excerpted telling is worth attending to in detail because it frames many of the key issues for necessary for understanding how people view Kedarnath both inside and outside the region of Garhwal. Tiwari-ji began by referring (initially without explanation) to one of the most famous details of this story: that Shiva tried to hide from the Pandavas by taking the form of a buffalo.

> There are different published versions coming out—there is a Hindi one, there is a Marathi one, here there is a Gujarati one—it depends. . . . I will tell you particularly about the subject of Kedarnath-Ji, what is the importance of Kedarnath here, what is the importance of God here. So many people come here—why do they come? With what sort of mind-set are they coming? Some people come here and say that the true form [Hindi: *svarup*] of God [Hindi: *Bhagwan*] is that of a buffalo. A buffalo, meaning, they say that . . . the buffalo is God's true form.[8] But, and here I give something of my own presentation that I give to *yatris,* to them I say that the true form of God is not in the form of a buffalo. God's *linga* of light [Hindi: *jyotirling*] is here from before then. That is to say, God's *linga* of light is here from before the beginning.

Here Tiwari-Ji mentioned two other stories connected to Kedarnath that he regarded as notable: the time when Ravan took *darshan* of Shiva in Kedarnath, and the time when Shiva told a king named Kedara that, as a boon, he would add the suffix *-natha* (Sanskrit: lord, in Hindi *-nath*) to the king's name and make it into the place-name for the Himalayan abode we now know as Kedarnath. Tiwari-Ji then went on:

> We can say that there is no single definite story that we can tell you here that says, "Brother, this is God's importance, and this is the greatness of the place." Starting a long time ago, God has given *darshan* [or alternatively "become manifest"] in different forms [Hindi: *rup*] and in different ways [Hindi: *dhang*]. You will have already obtained some information on the history of the Pandavas; the history associated with them is from almost five thousand years ago. Bhagwan himself knew that this *linga* of light is without beginning.

As noted above, part of the traditional responsibility of pilgrimage priests like Tiwari-Ji is to offer a coherent understanding of the character of the pilgrimage site, usually in the form of a story. For Kedarnath, as for almost any other place of religious significance in the world, there are always multiple stories, and what the *tirth purohit* tells on any given occasion is typically a context-sensitive and synthetic performance. In the beginning of his narration, Tiwari-Ji made it clear that he was aware of possible contradictions among different foundation narratives about Kedarnath, possible confusions about Shiva's form in the place and

how that form came to be established. He began by harmonizing the idea that the greatness of Kedarnath stemmed from the arrival of the Pandavas with the famous account of Kedarnath as a *jyotirlinga,* a *linga* of light whose presence in the place is without beginning, the aspect of Kedarnath that is the subject of the next chapter, "Lord of Kedar." As Tiwari-Ji related,

> Lord Shri Krishna knew that there is a *jyotirlinga* here and that until the Pandavas took *darshan* of that *linga* their wickedness [Hindi: *pap*] would not be cleansed. . . . After the *Mahabharata* war happened, a very awful war that lasted for eighteen days in which everyone who was related to the lineage of the Kauravas died with no survivors, including the Pandavas' guru . . . their blood relations, those who were special to them—there were no survivors—at that time, when at the end the Pandavas finished ruling their own kingdom, they felt like this: "What did we do, and who made us do this? Lord Krishna made us do this. So much grievous calamity!"
>
> So Yudhishthira said to God [here, Krishna], "Lord, you have caused us to be so very guilty [Hindi: *hamara itna bara dosh lagaya*], guilty of killing fathers, guilty of killing mothers, guilty of killing those of our lineage, tell us what greater *pap* [Hindi: wicked deed] in the world is there? Where do we need to go for expiation [Hindi: *nivaran*]?" So, Lord Shri Krishna said, "Actually you have done really wicked deeds [Hindi: *aghor pap*]." When Lord Shri Krishna said this, then Dharmaraja Yudhishthira himself said, "It was you who inspired us, saying, 'Fight, fight, destroy *adharma*' [Hindi: anti-*dharma,* in this context injustice]. And now you are saying to us, 'You have done wicked things.'" So then Lord Shri Krishna said, "It was against *adharma* that I inspired you, but just because it was against *adharma* does not mean that you were not fighting. How would that happen? *Adharma* always grows, it never lessens, it never ends. But you actually did the deed—you killed relatives and you killed your guru, so you are guilty of murder. And for that you need to perform expiation."
>
> So Lord Shri Krishna again said to them, "Go to the Himalaya, go where God [Hindi: *Bhagwan*] has a place called Kedar. God has a *jyotirlinga* there and he himself is present [Hindi: *virajman*] in that place, and until that *linga* appears to you there and until you touch [Hindi: *sparsh*] it then you will not obtain the actual [Hindi: *sakshat*] *darshan* of God." So the Pandavas wandered and wandered until they came to Guptkashi [in the Kedarnath valley]. Lord Shankar [Shiva] and Mother Parvati were resting there, and Mother Parvati was troubled that the Pandavas were distressed and worrying, "Where has he gone, has he gone in this valley or that valley. . . . Where is this road?"

The body of Tiwari's account begins near the end of the plot of the *Mahabharata* epic, after the war in Kurukshetra has finished. The Pandavas are victorious, having followed the counsel of Krishna to return from exile and recover their kingdom from their relatives through a war so bloody that James Hegarty (2012, 78) termed it "megadeath." Yet what they did in the pursuit of *dharma* was morally complicated and painful, and it weighs heavily upon them. They killed friends and kin. In Sanskrit versions of the *Mahabharata* a heavy grief hangs over the story.

As his male subjects "slaughter each other in an orgy of alliterative, drink-fueled, violence," the god-in-human-form Krishna dies (Hegarty 2012, 77). Only after his death do the Pandavas begin a *yatra* up into the Himalaya for what Hegarty (2012, 77) terms "suicide-by-pilgrimage." Tiwari-Ji continued:

> Whenever one goes to a new place . . . it is necessary to ask people where is this side street, where is this store—that's how it is in cities. So at that time what must their experience have been like? . . . It must have been dark, *no population* [said in English], no habitations [Hindi: *basti*], just jungle. You just take a walk around here five thousand years ago. . . . All these hotels and lodges you see were built since I've been living here, in the last ten-fifteen years. Before that there were . . . huts here. . . . People used to make huts or temporary dwellings [Hindi: *jhompri*].

This story, told in 2007, echoes many conversations I had in Kedarnath with both locals and visitors where the speaker would compare the high-intensity, overbuilt Kedarnath of recent years with that of earlier and quieter times when the place was in more accord with its Himalayan surroundings and when the signs of human presence made no pretense about their ephemeral nature. The year 2007 in Kedarnath was, like much of the last decade and a half, a time of constant building. People were renovating old structures and adding on new rooms and new floors targeted at the increasingly middle-class *yatris* who were coming to Kedarnath willing to pay for larger rooms with in-room hot water, fancy blankets, and prepared-to-order regional cuisine. There were always contractors bringing in cement on the backs of ponies. It was a time when it made sense to invest, and increasingly Kedarnath had become a testament to the incentives of capital—a bustling small village at approximately 3,500 meters (almost 12,000 feet) in the Himalaya where different kinds of food, clothing, movies, medical services, forms of transportation, cell phone service, a railway reservation office, and related amenities were usually available. It added to the impressiveness of the place—that humans had been able to create so much so fast in such a challenging environment. The farther back one goes in the history of Kedarnath in the twentieth century, the less common it was to actually spend the night in Kedarnath. Tiwari-Ji continued:

> In Gaurikund, here in Kedarnath, *yatris* used to live in those huts, so if you took a walk around even before that what would be there? In my opinion, there would have been . . . jungle, forest, well there's not that much jungle in the Himalaya, so there would have been snow. So, Lord Shankar [Shiva] says to Mother Parvati . . . their goal is there in the Himalaya, at Kedarnath, they have to search for the *linga* at Kedarnath [i.e., not in Guptkashi]. So Mother Parvati says, "You do what you want, but I will certainly give them *darshan*." So Lord Shankar disappeared—there in a manner of speaking he became hidden [Hindi: *gupt*]. And they say that this is where Guptkashi [Hindi: hidden Kashi] gets its name, and there [in Guptkashi] Mother Parvati herself gives *darshan* to the Pandavas. And she says to them, "I can't do

anything for you now, but I can give you a little guidance and tell you where to go, which road to take—I can do that much, I can make the road comfortable for you." So when Mother Parvati said this they somehow saw the road here, and then they saw that buffalo, that illusion in the shape of a buffalo [Hindi: *maya-rupi bhains*], they saw that here.

With this mention of the buffalo, Tiwari-Ji began to narrate in detail one of the distinctive stories about Shiva's presence and form in Kedarnath: that Shiva had taken the form of a buffalo to hide from the Pandavas. In Tiwari-Ji's view this decision was itself a memory of an earlier occurrence: "Once it happened that . . . God took the form of a buffalo to kill the demon Bhasmasur here. . . . It was that buffalo form that God assumed here." Then Tiwari-Ji returned to the historical present of the story in which the Pandavas were trying to find where Shiva was hiding among the buffalo herd.

> So . . . he [probably Yudhishthira] said to Bhima, "Make those buffaloes come out [Hindi: *nikalo*] from the herd one by one; among them is the true form of God." So as they were sorting the buffalo herd one by one, each of the buffalo went to the *linga* [which as Tiwari-Ji previously mentioned was already present in the place] and were getting absorbed in it [Hindi: *us hi ling mem ja rahe hain samavesh ho ja rahe hain*]. The Pandavas . . . are driving the buffaloes the way they drive cows [Hindi: *hamkna*], one by one. . . . So the buffalo that was God, it came here and right at that moment it got absorbed into the Shiva *linga*.

Shiva hides from the Pandavas. He takes the form of a buffalo, a form more commonly associated with *rakshasas,* demons whose battles with gods and goddesses constitute some of the most enduring and foundational stories about the gods and goddesses worshipped across South Asia. From this buffalo form the Pandavas drive him into his more fundamental, beginningless form—the *linga* that is already part of the landscape of the place. In this narrative, Shiva is both already in the place and coming to be present in a new way. In many accounts of this scene Bhima spreads his legs and forces the buffalo to pass through his legs one by one— a passage that Shiva refuses to make, thereby identifying himself. Work by David Shulman (1976) has shown that in South Indian versions of conflicts between Devi and the buffalo demon Mahishasura the buffalo demon is sometimes identified as a devotee of Shiva; sometimes the vanquishing of the buffalo demon also entails direct violence by the Goddess toward Shiva himself. Stephen Alter (2001, 265) has suggested that this moment in the Kedarnath story is connected to a moment in the rituals surrounding the historically common practice of buffalo sacrifice (usually to a form of the Goddess) in Garhwal and Kumaon in which it is made certain that none of the buffaloes to be sacrificed are gods in disguise. This confirmation is carried out by forcing the buffaloes to pass through the center of a broken rock. Alter suggests that in the Kedarnath story Bhima's legs take the place

of the broken rock. Thus this scene in the Kedarnath foundation story may signal Bhima's intention to carry out a buffalo sacrifice, a threat that mythically conflates Shiva's buffalo form with the buffalo form of his demonic adversary.

Tiwari-Ji continued: "So one by one they were disappearing, every single one of those illusory buffaloes disappeared, and the one that was God's true form began to be absorbed into that *linga,* it was going there. Like when you have seen in some documentary. . . . That all happened. . . . Bhagwan's buffalo form was being absorbed into the *linga,* it was showing the way."

In many versions of this story, the Pandavas at this point identify Shiva and grab him to prevent him from leaving. Each of the five brothers grabs a part of Shiva, parts that remain in the landscape and then become the self-manifest rock *lingas* found in Kedarnath and the other four of the Panch Kedar (the Five Kedars, five Shaiva temples in central Garhwal). Shiva's backside, his "back-portion" (Hindi: *prishth-bhag*), becomes the Kedarnath *linga.* In other versions, Shiva's *prishth-bhag* stays in Kedarnath and his face emerges at Pashupatinath in Kathmandu, Nepal.

> So when the Pandavas grabbed [Hindi: *pakarte hain*] that buffalo and touched it, in a manner of speaking they touched the *linga* of God [here Shiva]. They achieved . . . the touching of God; the true form of God that is present in the light is what the Pandavas touched. Then you may understand that the buffalo disappeared and then there . . . it happened that the divine form got extended/stretched [Hindi: *jo divyasvarup tha vo tan hua*] and God in original true form gave *darshan* to the Pandavas. And he said, "Look, you endured pain and you have also done wicked deeds, but however much wickedness you did now it has all been cleansed [Hindi: *dhul ho gaya hai*]. Now tell me what you wish for—what do you desire?"

Once, during an interview I held in 2005 with a family living in Jaipur's old city who had visited once Kedarnath, an elderly woman strongly disagreed with the idea that the Pandavas had "grabbed" Shiva. The verb *grab,* when used in connection with cattle, can refer to the common way of steering cattle by grabbing them near the top of the tail (Hindi: *punch pakarna*) and twisting the tail to make the animal move.[9] It was a complicated moment—I had a printed pamphlet version of the story with me at the time that laid rest to the worry that the discrepancy had been solely due to my own insufficient level of Hindi knowledge. But when I showed her the printed version she, and the rest of her family, became uneasy. It felt difficult to them. How could the Pandavas have been disrespectful to God? They would never have done something improper (Hindi: *anucit*).

Because of this conversation, the question of the propriety of the Pandavas' actions became part of my stock set of conversation and interview questions when speaking to people about Kedarnath. In some versions of this story Bhima, the famously too-passionate and fierce Pandava, is angered by Shiva's unwillingness to be fully present for the Pandavas and strikes him with his mace, a narrative

variant that underscores the ambiguity of whether and how we are to view the Pandavas at this moment in the story as moral exemplars. On May 3, 2007, when I was sitting in the reception area of the Maharashtra Mandal *dharamshala* in Kedarnath with several families from Maharashtra and Rajasthan, I asked one of the husbands from this group whether he thought Bhima's behavior was appropriate. The question gave him pause. His wife said she thought Bhima's behavior was acceptable because he was trying to obtain liberation (Hindi: *mukti*) and therefore the means were justified. The implication, made explicit in many other such conversations, was that such behavior toward a deity would normally not be appropriate. When I was standing in line on May 20, 2007, and discussing this story, a member of a group from Gujarat said that the Pandavas were after all only human and that humans get angry (Hindi: *gussa*), even if they are standing in front of God.

The quest of the Pandavas for Shiva does not feel like a straightforward quest. It is the story of a deity who makes himself intentionally difficult to reach by humans whose search for him shows just how human they are. Now we return to Tiwari-Ji's account:

> Then the Pandavas said, "For what purpose would we need a favor? We just need a little place to live in the Himalaya—-we just want to live here." Then the Pandavas felt this inspiration and craziness inside that "we should build a temple and do God's *puja*," and God said, "Do your *puja*. And . . . make a road for coming generations, since you have already made a temple. And when future generations come, among them your names will be immortal. Whenever any *yatris* come here in God's name they also will come in your name." And the Pandavas' name became immortal.

Kedarnath, as Shukla-Ji noted in the Introduction, is a meeting point for mountain people, particularly of the Kedarnath valley, and *yatris* from all over India and beyond. It is possible to see the echoes of this idea in how Tiwari-Ji speaks of the Pandavas here. His presentation combines the internal regional importance of the Pandavas with their broader reputation beyond the region that is known to visitors. As William Sax (2002, 43–44) and Karin Polit (2008) have shown for Garhwal, and as Jon Leavitt (1988) has shown for Kumaon, many residents of Uttarakhand understand their mountains to be the birthplace of many of the primary characters of the *Mahabharata,* both Pandava and Kaurava, and locate much of the plot of the epic in their own region. For locals, particularly belonging to Rajput castes, the Pandavas and in some cases Kauravas such as Duryodhana are ancestors, effectively lineage deities whose stories are performed every year and whose powerful personalities possess the performers. Looking at the large stone blocks out of which the current temple is built, a structure that later withstood the floods of 2013, one could easily imagine that the Pandavas who managed to bring these massive pieces of stone up into the mountains were more than

human and worthy of worship as lineage deities. The geographer Surinder Bhardwaj (1973, 146) famously created a typology of Hindu pilgrimages based on survey data about the relative distances between home place and pilgrimage place traveled by *yatris*: "local" sites patronized only by residents of a specific locality, "subregional" (high and low) sites important to a related set of local communities, "regional" sites visited by devotees from across a region, "supraregional" sites that pulled visitors from across regions, and "Pan-Hindu" sites whose attractive power rose beyond even the supraregional. From this typology it becomes clear that the connection of the Pandavas to Kedarnath is one of the factors that makes Kedarnath significant at almost all of these levels.

At this point Tiwari-Ji's account turned to the Great Path:

> Then the Pandavas went ahead, and perhaps they disappeared somewhere in the Himalaya. They say about Dharmaraja Yudhishthira that he was journeying in the Himalaya, and one time there was a dog going with him, *dog* [said in English], *shvan* [the Sanskrit word for dog as opposed to the Hindi *kutta*]. The dog was going with him. It was a big surprise to Yudhishthira: "There is a dog going with me. Where did this dog come from? There aren't any habitations close by, so why he is going with me?" The dog was going where he went. So at one point during that time, they say, the dog got worms. It would be a surprise, how do you get worms in the Himalaya anyway, but they say that Dharmaraja Yudhishthira took those worms out of the dog and threw them on the ground. . . . [Then] this also seemed like a wicked deed [Hindi: *pap*] to him. Yudhishthira thought, "I already committed *pap* on my way here. Those worms shouldn't die and also the dog should survive." So they say that Dharmaraja Yudhishthira tore open his thigh and taking the worms out he put them into his own thigh. Then God himself gave him true *darshan* and said, "I thought that they just call you Dharma-King [Sanskrit: *Dharmaraja*], but actually you really are a king of Dharma." And it is believed that Yudhishthira went to heaven in his own body.

In between the first and second sentences of this part of Tiwari-Ji's exposition lies the particularly poignant segment of the journey of the Pandavas into the Himalaya that I saw on a television screen while I waited in line to enter the temple. When they enter the Himalaya the Pandavas number six: Yudhishthira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, and their joint-wife Draupadi. But as they walk further up in the Himalaya, toward the heavens of the gods, one by one everyone but Yudhishthira dies in some way, and their deaths are clearly linked in many tellings to a moral failing from their life. By the end, only Yudhishthira, the character of the *Mahabharata* who is defined by his pursuit of *dharma* regardless of the human cost, remains. His guilt at the death of the worms in this telling exemplifies this trait. Yudhishthira does not die: he walks into the afterlife *in his own body* (Sanskrit: *sadeha*). This is the path of what Jvalaprasad Mishra, in the foreword to one of two commercially published editions of the *Kedarakalpa*

(a late tantric text connected to Kedarnath) calls "the path of going to Kailasa in one's own body" (Hindi: *sadeh Kailash jane ka marg*) (Padumā and Hajārībāg 1907, 1). This idea of liberation through the body, often involving a process of self-divinization, is one of the hallmarks of the tradition of South Asian practice that is described by the umbrella term of *Tantra.* The *Kedarakalpa* tells the story of the journey of five yogis who travel from the world of death into the presence of Shiva at Mount Kailasa and into the state of liberation (Hindi: *moksh*) via the Garhwal Himalaya. They reach this state of liberation, also glossed as the state of being in the presence of Shiva, with "their physical bodies intact," an important difference from how nontantric experiences of death and liberation are often conceived (Goswamy 2013, 190). As the *Kedarakalpa* narrates this journey it also describes the sacred potency of the Himalayan landscape in minute detail and provides instructions for different ritual actions (drinking water, reciting powerful sacred verses [*mantras*]) that are to be done at different locations.[10] I will return to some of these details in the next chapter.

The area in and around Kedarnath is associated with death and what is beyond death in several related ways. Several scholars regard it as quite likely that the site now known as Kedarnath may have been once been better known as "the high place of the sage Bhrigu" (Sanskrit: Bhrigutunga) or "the falling place of the sage Bhrigu" (Sanskrit: Bhrigupatana)*,* which is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* (Naithānī 2006, 175–76; Ḍabarāl, n.d., 61–62; Rāvat 2006, 84). Garhwali historian Shivaprasad Dabaral suggests that the "Path of Bhrigu" (Hindi: Bhrigupanth) is another name for the Great Path and notes that the *Mahabharata* records that Arjuna went there on his journey through the Himalaya (Ḍabarāl, n.d., 308–9). William Sax (1991, 28), summarizing the work of historians and colonial-era travelogues, writes that "the Path of Bhrigu above Kedarnath . . . was traditionally associated with suicide." This life-ending practice would have taken the form of devotees jumping or falling from a precipice in or near Bhrigutunga/Bhrigupatana, and Ḍabarāl (n.d., 308) connects this practice with the early identity of the site of Bhrigutunga (Ḍabarāl, n.d., 308). Sax (1991, 22) recorded a song sung by Garhwali women from the village of Nauti to the goddess Nanda Devi in which one of her forms, Maya, ends her life by jumping from "the high path of Bhrigu" because she is distraught over her inability to find a husband who can complete her and fulfill her desire.

I remember in 2007, immediately prior to the opening of Kedarnath for the pilgrimage season in May, there were rumors in the Ukhimath bazaar that an elderly man had managed to make his way all the way to Kedarnath village without anyone noticing, had walked up into the end of the valley immediately behind the temple, had sat down there, and later was found dead in that position by police. When one heads into the high Himalaya the distinction between physical ascent and spiritual (Hindi: *adhyatmik*) ascent seems to blur.

THE LINE

All of the above would be in my mind when I waited to enter the Kedarnath temple and take *darshan*. I would reflect about what it meant to say that in Kedarnath one stands in the footsteps of the Pandavas. Their pursuit of Shiva is a morally ambiguous story—in some versions they win access to God through an irreverent persistence that verges on violence, while in others they reverently come before Shiva at the end of a long process of self-purification. Shiva is everywhere in the story: in the ground, as the buffalo, and as universally pervasive vibratory light. Always we know that afterwards the Pandavas walk up and out of the human world. During the high season in 2007, 2008, and 2011, the dynamics of the line reminded me of the moral questions raised by the Pandavas' ambiguously reverent and irreverent pursuit of Shiva. I came to see the line, or queue, in Kedarnath as the site of an embodied controversy about the relationship of means and ends. In South Asian contexts, analyzing the queue, and more broadly the act of waiting, as a situation filled with symbolic weight and social contestation is of course not a novel idea (Jeffrey 2010; Gandhi 2013; Corbridge 2004).[11] But in Kedarnath, as is common in large pilgrimage places in South Asia, waiting in line was one of the events that defined the public life of the place much of the time, and the story of the Pandavas explicitly frames the place, at some level, as a place for thinking about *dharma*. So as I stood in line myself in Kedarnath, I came to see how this well-known situation could be seen to take on something of the character of the place. Some *yatris* would attempt, either surreptitiously or brazenly, to jump the queue and enter the line wherever they could. For them, what mattered was access to what and who was inside, however gained. After all, just as in the case of the Pandavas, in the pursuit of *mukti* what is not justified? This would enrage others who felt that putting up with the hardship of waiting in line was part of the necessary internal purification for going in front of Shiva in a state that was pure (Hindi: *shudh*). Verbal and physical confrontations were commonplace during the line in high season. These confrontations also implicated local tensions about control of the site and access to the temple. I do not mean to suggest that this framing was shared by most of the people who waited in line with me. But I think it helps us to see how tightly embodied experience, story, ritual practice, and meaning are bound up together in such moments.

THE RESEARCHER WAITS IN LINE

I often made a point of waiting in line myself rather than simply observing the line. Many Kedarnath locals did not understand why I did this. It was clear that, both because I had been already living in the Kedarnath valley for about five months by the beginning of the 2007 and because I was a white male American researcher,

I could enter by the side door whenever I chose. However, I usually waited in line. As a participant observer I wanted to experience the line, and it was usually a useful opportunity to chat with *yatris*. I also did not want to draw the ire of *yatris*, and personally I have never liked people who jump ahead in lines. But waiting in line sometimes turned out to be a trying experience. It was often a moment when circumstances would force me to wrestle with the complicated and challenging issues bound up with being who I was and working in the Kedarnath valley. The following is an example of what I mean that ties together some of the themes and information I have introduced in this chapter.

On July 3, 2007, in Kedarnath, I had fixed an appointment to interview the chief (Hindi: *pradhan*) of a village in the Kedarnath valley. It turned out that I had, unknowingly, fixed an appointment to be interviewed. In a dark room in a lodge just off the main bazaar, in front of several other local Kedarnath valley men, my interviewer disingenuously begged me to write about the glorious Kedarnath that is described in Puranic literature and not to write about the current state of the place. Another man wanted to make sure that I was not doing some kind of spying (Hindi: *jahsousi*) that would later result in a sociological exposé. This reverse interview was a nerve-wracking conversation that went on for over half an hour on this single point. I refused to simply promise to do as requested. I said that if I promised but then went on to describe what was really happening in Kedarnath the chief would say that I had broken my promise. I said that my job, as a researcher, was to write about the relationship between what people experienced (Hindi: *anubhav*) in Kedarnath and the realities (Hindi: *hakikat*) of what the place felt like from day to day. I said that this meant that I would in fact describe, to some extent, some of the messy social realities that could be found in Kedarnath. But I continued to say that, as a scholar trying to describe *hakikat,* I would be doing a poor job if I did not also attend to the power of Shiva understood to center in the temple. Everything in Kedarnath directly or indirectly connected to the presence of Shiva or the Himalaya or the Goddess or some combination of these. At this point my primary interviewer asked me to describe my own experience (Hindu: *anubhav*). So I told him a story that began with my waiting in line to enter the temple.

On May 30, 2007, my father was scheduled to have a cataract operation, so I decided that I would have a *puja* done the day before. I was feeling my distance from my own family at that time very keenly and thinking that it could not hurt. I joined the line at 5:30 a.m., a half hour before the temple doors opened for general *darshan* at 6:00. When I neared the door about two and a half hours later I was extremely annoyed. My patience was gone, my ostensible distance from the situation as a participant observer had vanished, and my temper was frayed to the breaking point by the numerous times I had felt compelled to verbally and sometimes physically prevent people from entering the line either directly in front

of me or directly behind me. The worst was when a woman approached me and announced that she was rejoining the line after putting down her sandals outside the temple courtyard. She entered the line directly behind me and steadfastly stuck to her lie in the face of all my protests, then succeeded in getting into line five spots behind me. The second worst was when I was offered money, which I angrily refused, to let people enter the line directly in front of me.

As I entered the door to the temple I felt very troubled: In such a state, what is the use of doing a *puja,* even as a non-Hindu participant observer? This doubt grew as I proceeded in line through the anteroom and up to the doorway of the inner sanctum. Then everything changed. At the same moment, when I saw both the Kedarnath *linga* and the *Ved-pathi* who would do my *puja*, my annoyance and anger somehow evaporated, and for reasons I still cannot parse I began, against my will, to weep. Some of what I was feeling at that point, as I listened to the mantras said by the *Ved-pathi* and clutched his knee as I fought for position in the crowded space, was a very strong memory and love and concern for my father, and the rest of what I was feeling I simply cannot name. I then left as quickly as I could, did circumambulation (Hindi: *parikram*) of the temple, and went back to my room without speaking to anyone and stayed there for several hours, in the dark. This story changed the conversation. The immediate response of my interviewer was that I had experienced *sakshat darshan,* the vision of an ultimately true form of divinity. This was a bit of ethnographic irony: it had become standard for me to ask about *sakshat darshan* during conversations and interviews (whether someone believed it was possible, whether the particular person had experienced it). Here it was my own connection to *sakshat darshan* that was the topic of conversation. I said that I had not felt, during my experience in the inner sanctum, that I was seeing Shiva in a true way. I simply had had an emotional response that I did not understand and could not control. He said, "You do not realize that you had *sakshat darshan*, but that is what it was." Shortly afterward, the conversation ended.

MY PLACE AS A RESEARCHER

Not only this conversation but many others with pilgrims and locals raised questions for me about where to place myself, and where others placed me, on the already existent continuum of ways that Westerners were present in the area. Anthropologists had worked in the Kedarnath valley before (notably Karin Polit and Eric Schwabach), and Kedarnath valley residents had often heard of William Sax. Westerners with highly variable levels of cultural sensitivity and cultural literacy came through the Kedarnath valley area as tourists and trekkers all the time and stayed anywhere from several days to several months. A German woman, formerly a student of anthropology, was drawn to the Kedarnath valley through

her dreams. She became the disciple of a renunciant guru in the Kalimath area, learned Hindi, Nepali, Sanskrit, and Garhwali, and achieved a high level of respect in the area. Now referred to as a mother (Hindi: *ma* or *mai*), Saraswati-Mai, as she is called, has been in the area for well over a decade and carries out *puja* at her guru's ashram. There is an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) based in Ukhimath. Employment with this NGO is highly prized, and it was with considerable consternation that I found myself renting two rooms in a house that had been historically connected to it. I did not want to be seen as another rich American deepening the groove of Western economic involvement with the Kedarnath valley region. Yet I was unable to avoid this trajectory completely, and Bhupendra worked for that very NGO after working with me. The Kedarnath valley also saw the occasional Western renunciant.

Usually I presented myself primarily as a researcher—a somewhat familiar but also murky category. Introductory conversations would often follow a pattern: Are you a tourist/trekker? No. Are you with the NGO? No. Ah, then you must be doing "research and stuff" (Hindi: *research vagaira kuch*). Yes, I would say. I once asked a teenage boy what he thought *research* meant. He said that it meant searching for things (Hindi: *khoj karna*), which I thought was a reasonable answer. My goal was in many ways ironically parallel to that of the *tirth purohits*: I wanted to create rapport with visitors during their short time in Kedarnath so that I could collect something from them. My primary positionality with regard to *yatris* was not that of scholars such as Ann Grodzins Gold (1988) or E. Valentine Daniel (1984), who as researcher-participant went on a *yatra* for the duration of the journey with a group of *yatris*.

Yet in other ways I was myself a *yatri*—a visitor to the region struggling to balance my reactions to the awe and power of the place with the mundane difficulties of living at an altitude of approximately 3,500 meters without having spent most of my life in a similar situation. As a participant observer trying to be as much a part of what was going on around me as possible, I looked like an odd sort of Shiva devotee (Hindi: *Shiv-bhakt*). At one point during my time in Kedarnath itself, an important officer of the Samiti at Kedarnath asked me, in the presence of several others, when we were going to go ahead and do my sacred thread (Sanskrit: *upanayana*) ceremony to become Hindu. I declined, saying that if I did the *upanayana* ceremony it would complicate my life in America and my family would not like it. When people would ask me why I was doing what I was doing, I think my answer that satisfied all parties the most was that I was studying how they experienced the place and trying to understand my own attraction (Hindi: *akarshan,* recalling Shukla-Ji's use of this idea in the Introduction) to it at the same time.

I experienced a kind of *khicri* (Hindi: a dish where rice and lentils are cooked together along with whatever else one has at hand) intersubjectivity to working

in Kedarnath. My interactions with visitors to the region were brief encounters whose tenor was widely variable. Sometimes they would be quick, surface conversations, but on occasion a deep rapport arose by virtue of the conditions we shared: on *yatra* in a special place, far from home, high up in the mountains in fickle weather conditions. Yet I did, in my own complicated foreign way, partially join the fraternity of those who worked in Kedarnath. *Fraternity* is a fair word, I think. Kedarnath closes down entirely for the winter, and during the summer months of the pilgrimage season 99 percent of the temporary residents of Kedarnath are men. Kedarnath is not a socially three-dimensional Garhwali village. There are few women and children. There are no schools or homes with family *puja* shrines. The pipes and phone cables are put up and taken down each season.

In contrast to my relationships with visitors, I developed long-term relationships and friendships with some Kedarnath valley locals and, conservatively, am known to hundreds of people connected to Kedarnath in the Kedarnath valley. But there has always been a complexity to developing these relationships—the differences of history, culture, and socioeconomic status hang between us in ways that have been very difficult to move past, I think in part because of the intensity of the processes of commodification that have surrounded the pilgrimage tourism industry in recent years in Garhwal. Thus my work with Kedarnath has not been based on long-term relationships cultivated with individual women in the manner of Karin Polit (2012) or the decades-long collaboration of William Sax with Dabar Singh or of Ann Grodzins Gold with Bhoju Ram Gujar (Sax 2009, vii, 7; Gold and Gujar 2002, 30). Bhupendra and I had begun to move past the foreigner-guide friendship where we began, but he is not here anymore. In and around Ukhimath, as I became more familiar to locals and became myself more familiar with how to communicate and navigate, I began to have substantive conversations with Garhwali women, but this really began only after I had been working in the Kedarnath valley for well over a year. Once or twice near the end of my dissertation fieldwork in 2008, as I walked down a lane in Ukhimath toward Omkareshwar Temple (where Kedarnath-Shiva is worshiped in the winter), several children called me "uncle" in Garhwali, a sign that I had entered their social map. But woven through all of these long-term and short-term relationships was my persistent focus on and engagement with *place*: Kedarnath, of course, but also Ukhimath, Guptkashi, Lamgaundi, and Madmaheshwar as well as several other villages and shrines in the Kedarnath valley.[12]

The complicated nature of these local and visitor relationships was in a way a sign of the times. At a pace that correlated roughly to the growth of pilgrimage tourism in recent decades and the new statehood of Uttarakhand (first as Uttaranchal) in 2000, the Kedarnath valley had begun to leave behind the Garhwal chronicled by William Sax, a Garhwal in which locals were conversant

with their performance traditions and unashamed about the powerful, possessive presence of their local deities. The performance of episodes from the *Mahabharata,* possession by local forms of the deity Bhairavnath, all-night singing and drumming rituals that worshipped local deities (Garhwali: *jagar*), and other features of Garhwali culture were still found in the area, but many young people were beginning to have complicated and often uncomfortable relationships to these cultural forms. Some found possession a bit embarrassing, and most could not understand or repeat the words to songs sung in classical/older (Garhwali: *tet*) Garhwali. As Karin Polit (2008) and Stefan Fiol (2010, 2012) have documented, these older performance traditions have begun to pass into different performative and representative registers: as stand-alone pieces in heritage festivals, staged performances filmed for commercial video distribution beyond the region, or private videos uploaded to YouTube and shared on Facebook. There is a genre of Garhwali songs known as "high-pasture songs" (Garhwali: *payari geet*) that village women sing to welcome traveling deities who, carried on palanquins, have come down from the high places where they live and are traveling through their territory and visiting the villages there.[13] In the Kedarnath valley women, reportedly, used to sing these songs for the Kedarnath deity procession but do not do so anymore. For Madmaheshvar, another locally important form of Shiva, there are still women who sing *payari geet* to welcome him, but few women know the words today and most are middle-aged or older. During my fieldwork I have been asked to explain the plot of *Anaconda* as it was playing on HBO in the Ukhimath bazaar and the refrain to Shakira's "Hips Don't Lie." I once entered the living room of a friend's house to find his grandmother watching *World Wide Wrestling*. Standing in line and seeing a video showing the Pandavas on the Great Path reminded me of these traditional Garhwali religious worlds. But the fact that it was a video, and that there were screens in Kedarnath capable of showing such videos (at least when the electricity was working), also reminded me how much was changing. And my own fraught experience of waiting in line reminded me of my own complicated relationship to the people around me and to Kedarnath.

FRAMES OF APPROACH

The story of the Pandava's climb to heaven makes a good narrative frame for approaching Kedarnath generally in the context of this book. This suggestion builds on a mode of interpreting myth suggested by Laurie Patton and Wendy Doniger (1996, 392): that scholars should "take myths seriously in their own right . . . evaluate them as forms as narrative reasoning equal to our own." While this approach is, unmistakably, my own analytic imposition on the data I have gathered, I think that it is a reasonable analytic imposition that arises out of

some of the most important and best-known stories about Kedarnath. We see in this tale a sense of Kedarnath, and more broadly its Himalayan locale, as a place of human effort, of pursuit and violence. The journey to Kedarnath is not a journey that everyone survives. We see the ways in which Kedarnath is a place that both demands preparatory self-cultivation and puts people in positions that reveal their human failings. It is a place that both cares and does not care about human behavior. It is also a place, as I shall discuss in the next chapter in more detail, that enshrines Shiva's simultaneous presence and absence.

From conversations I have had with locals in Kedarnath about the idea of occupation (Hindi: *dhandha*) as it relates to the central and difficult-to-define idea of *dharma,* which in this context I will translate as the virtuous way one ought to act based on one's identity and/or occupation, it is possible to see the ambiguity of the connection between the power of Kedarnath and the necessity for proper behavior. I often had conversations in which people told me that their *dhandha* required them to have sharper dealings with guests and patrons than they personally would prefer, a trend that had clearly intensified in recent years. The amount of money that was circulating in the Kedarnath of recent, predisaster years was changing how people made decisions and how they related to one another. Now this has become a matter of regret, felt by some to have contributed to the disaster. Yet what does it mean to behave improperly in a *tirtha?* On the one hand, it is particularly inappropriate. On the other, *tirthas* are places that, by definition, have a surfeit of purificatory power, the ability to cleanse even the worst *karma.* We see both sides of this in the story of the Pandavas' climb to heaven (Hindi: *swargarohan*).

The interpretive depths of this story, however, should not create the impression that I think Kedarnath should be counted among what Elliott McCarter (2013, 50), in the course of his work on Kurukshetra, has termed "narrative-centric sites and sites where narrative formulations are active and meaningful." The stories of the Pandavas frame Kedarnath, as does the popular conception that the Himalaya are the preferred abode of Shiva. Yet it would be a mistake to understand Kedarnath as a place where the narration of these stories stands at the center of the character of the *tirtha.* Indeed, in recent years before the floods, I noticed that during the high season many *yatris* would come and go from Kedarnath without having heard a full version of this story, a development that, as Andrea Pinkney (2013a) has observed, makes the printed pamphlet versions of these stories in English and Indian regional languages all the more important. There were simply too many people and not enough time for what in earlier times would have been the ritual of narration by the *tirth purohit* soon after arrival into Kedarnath. Kedarnath is also not a place that has grown up around the idea of the investigation into and practice of virtuous conduct, as Leela Prasad (2006) has shown for the town of Shringeri, which is famous for (among other things) its association with the noted

nondualist philosopher Shankara. Kedarnath is, rather, a location where the stories themselves suggest that there is something they cannot communicate about how this place is experienced. The story of the Pandavas invites us to approach through multiple modalities what Stella Kramrisch (1981) once famously called "the presence of Shiva."