

Unstable Tradition: Heritage and the Religious in the Garhwal Himalaya of North India

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Abstract: Drawing on the work of two activist organizations currently operating in the North Indian state of Uttarakhand, this paper analyzes the malleability of the concept of heritage and its furtive embrace of the religious in the context of globalizing capital. Heritage consists, on the one hand, of the moment-to-moment interventions in the production of identity demanded by the political space of liberal democracy in the pluralistic nation-state; on the other, as a source of contemporary politicized identity, heritage calls forth a selective past that always threatens to undermine the very project for which it was summoned. The drama troupe SamvednaSamooch (A Company of the Concerned) stages heritage performances throughout Uttarakhand to inscribe particular iterations of regional tradition that render the religious in terms of folklore while evoking spontaneous ritual responses in its audiences. Similarly, Ganga Ahvaan (A Call to Save the Ganga) advocates for the halt to construction of hydroelectric projects along the upper reaches of the Ganges River on the basis of the river's foundational role in the generation of "Indian culture" for "thousands" of years. In either case, an appeal to a shared national or regional heritage cannot be made without reference to the religious, but the particularities of the religious call into question the en-heritaged subjectivities so produced.