

The Construction of Personhood: Two life stories from Garhwal

Antje Linkenbach

Introduction

This article presents two personal histories from the Garhwal Himalayas (Uttaranchal Pradesh). The protagonists originate from villages located in two different districts of Garhwal, and the stories mirror the different social and political contexts in which each person is situated and within which each life has developed. The stories vary according to the circumstances and genre in which they are presented. The first is a personal narrative told to the anthropologist, and the second is a song about Gaura Devi, the famous Chipko fighter, written and occasionally performed by a local poet.¹

Biographical research has always been a strong element of those academic disciplines which focus on events and processes, on the contingent and the individual (e.g. history and psychology). But in sociology and social anthropology, disciplines which often are said to concentrate on collectives and structures, biographical research has gained importance too, and this is for several reasons:

- By highlighting the *lifeworld* of individuals, their practices and experiences, biographical research illuminates the *relationship between structure and agency* in a particular society. Listening to personal narratives is one way of exploring how individuals understand society and how they act in society, i.e. how they cope with norms and constraints, with limits and possibilities.
- Biographical research helps us to get an individual's perspective on society—"to observe a particular society through the lens of individual lives" (Mirza and Strobel 1989: 1)—but it also brings into focus the "social structure of individuality" (Bude 1987: 109). The personal history of an individual reflects not only the relation of the person to himself, but also mirrors the experience of a particular time and social-

¹ The article is based on field research in Garhwal conducted between 1993-98. I thank Sundar Singh Rawat and Dhan Singh Rana for their cooperation and support. I am also indebted to Jayendra Singh Chauhan who worked with me as my research assistant.

ity and, in most cases, tries to compose the individual life as one which is socially recommendable.

- With its accent on individuals and their personal histories, biographical research aims to transcend the objectivistic view of a society by looking at it from within. But this is the case only to a certain extent. One has to take into consideration the fact that a narrator's self-presentation of his/her life is always a response to the demands of an Other.

Certain distinctions proposed by Vincent Crapanzano help us to structure the field of biographical research in social anthropology. Crapanzano distinguishes the "personal historical text produced by the anthropologist's informant for the anthropologist" from the 'life history' or 'case history' produced by the anthropologist for his audience on the basis of the informant's narrative (1977: 4). Thus, a life history or a case history are representations of a representation, a secondary interpretation. But what is the difference between a life history and a case history? They are two forms the anthropologist gives to the subject in his writing: the 'case history', like a biography, presents the subject from the perspective of an outsider and bears the impress of the narrator (Freud's case histories are good examples); the 'life history' presents the individual from his or her own perspective and so comes closer to an autobiography (a well-known example is Majorie Shostak's *Nisa*). However, it differs from an autobiography in that it is "an immediate response to a demand posed by an Other and carries within it the expectations of that Other" (Crapanzano 1977: 4). Mirza and Strobel have stressed the impact of the anthropologist on the construction of the personal text much more clearly than Crapanzano:

Unlike autobiographies, the initiation for which generally comes from the subject herself, a life history comes about as the collaboration between two individuals, often an insider speaking about herself and her society and an outsider asking questions from her own frame of reference. As such, a life history from the start embodies more than one person's agenda, purpose and interest. (Mirza and Stroebel 1989: 1)

My first example, the story of Sundar Singh Rawat, is just such a 'collaborative' life history. Sundar Singh's personal text is the outcome of a *dialogue*, it developed in the course of our *interaction*, and it is me, the anthropologist, who represents it. My second example is different. It concerns a local biography, constructed and presented by the narrator in the form of a poem. The poem has been composed *before* the anthropologist came to the village, it was only sung for me to illustrate the life of Gaura Devi, the famous Chipko fighter.² The poem is not based on a personal text

² The Chipko *āndolan* was a protest movement of people of Garhwal and Kumaon against the commercial felling of forests. The first campaigns started in 1973 in Chamoli District.

communicated by Gaura Devi herself, but on the author's acquaintance with her as well as on their shared experience of the Chipko struggle. The author, Dhan Singh Rana, has organized his representation according to his own personal intentions: with the life story of Gaura Devi he wants to communicate a message—not primarily to the anthropologist, but to the village people of his region and, maybe, to the nation and to the world. I take the story of Gaura Devi as it is—as a poem, which, like any piece of literature, invites comment and interpretation.

Before I present these two life histories, a few remarks are necessary on the geographical and socio-historical context in which they are situated. The new state of Uttaranchal Pradesh was formed in November 2000 out of the Himalayan part of Uttar Pradesh. It consists of the regions of Garhwal and Kumaon which are distinguished by their geographical and historical particularities. Whereas many parts of Kumaon are mediterranean in character and the landscape gives a clear view of the high Himalayan peaks, most of Garhwal is dominated by rugged mountain ranges, steep slopes and deep valleys. From the glaciers rise the holy rivers of Ganga and Yamuna. The remaining forests consist of oak, fir and spruce in the higher altitudes, and of pine in the lower ranges. Terraced fields may extend up to about 3000 metres and crops vary according to irrigation facilities and altitude (rice, millets, wheat, pulses, potatoes, apples). Garhwal and Kumaon were kingdoms under separate dynasties until the end of the 18th century, when the Gorkhali rulers from Nepal invaded and subjugated both regions. In 1815 the British defeated Gorkha and incorporated Kumaon, the eastern part of Garhwal, and the area around Dehra Dun into the colonial empire. The parts west of the Alakananda (today the districts of Uttarkashi and Tehri) were restored to the successor of the previous ruler of Garhwal. A new capital was built and the princely state was named Tehri Garhwal. The state merged with the Indian Union in 1949 and was integrated into Uttar Pradesh.

My first example, the life story of Sundar Singh Rawat, takes us to a village in Rawain, a region which constituted a separate administrative unit (*parganā*) in the former princely state of Tehri Garhwal and now forms the western part of Uttarkashi district. The village is divided into two parts: one is inhabited by Brahmins, the other by Rajputs and Harijans.³ All members of these three groups are landowners and concentrate on agriculture and animal husbandry. With a few exceptions they till their land themselves. No Shudra castes live in the region and members

³ The term 'harijan' ('children of God'), popularized by Gandhi to enhance the status of the so-called 'untouchables', is the most common self-description used by those belonging to the lowest strata in this area.

of Vaishya castes came as traders and businessmen in larger numbers only after the infrastructural development of the region, when they settled down in the cities and small townships. The story of Gaura Devi, my second example, is connected with Lata and Raini, two neighbouring villages inhabited by Tolchha Bhotiyas to the east of Joshimath in Chamoli District. The village economy is based on animal husbandry and rainfed cultivation on terraced slopes. Formerly, the villagers used to earn a good deal of their livelihood by collecting and selling medicinal and aromatic plants (*jarī butī*) and joining mountaineering expeditions to Nanda Devi as cooks and guides. With the establishment of Nanda Devi National Park in 1982, and Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve in 1988, trekking was banned and people's access to the forest totally restricted. Sources of additional income were no longer available and the Bhotiyas' living conditions started to deteriorate. In particular, the village of Raini became well known nationally and internationally during the peak of the Chipko *āndolan*, because the villagers and their supporters organised successful protest campaigns against the auctioning and felling of the local forest.

Sundar Singh Rawat: a life history

Sundar Singh was born in 1921 in a village located in the upper Yamuna valley. I met him for the first time in 1993 when I had settled down in a neighbouring village to study people's perceptions of the forest and local concepts of development. At that time Sundar Singh was 72 years old. Together with his wife, he cultivated the family's land, worked in the apple orchards, and cared for his animals. In the course of my research he turned out to be one of my best informants, as he had a vast knowledge of local history, religious practices and concepts, local ways of life, and local traditions. He could remember bygone times and events in detail and loved to talk about them with great enthusiasm. Sundar Singh still enjoyed a high status in the village. He functioned as the *wazīr* ('minister') of one of the main local deities, and during the time of the Raja of Tehri Garhwal the village's *mālguzār* (village head and collector of the king's taxes) was selected from his family: his father had been the last one, but villagers still used the title as a form of respectful address for Sundar Singh. Sundar Singh had married three times.⁴ He had separated from one wife after a few years of marriage, one wife had died several years before, and the third was still alive. Sundar Singh had four sons and three daughters, all of them educated and married. The sons had succeeded in gaining employment as a driver, a shopkeeper, and in military service. One daughter worked as a primary school teacher.

⁴ Polyandry and polygyny were common forms of marriage in Rawain and were still practised occasionally.

When I asked Sundar Singh to tell me about his life he agreed without much hesitation, but he seemed puzzled by the demand. "I have told you so much about the village, the region, the people, the gods—why are you interested in a single life?" he asked. I tried to explain that by listening to his personal life I could not only learn more about him, about his experiences, attitudes, and beliefs, but I would also have the chance to learn about the everyday life of the village people in former times and today: how they spent their youth, when and how they married, their plans and hopes, what made them happy or sad, what were important, memorable events, in what sense the life in the region underwent changes, and so on. It was this second argument which seemed to convince Sundar Singh. To see his life as an example of the way of life of villagers in the Yamuna Valley, as a valuable source of everyday history (*Alltagsgeschichte*), or "to observe a particular society through the lens of individual lives" (Mirza and Strobel 1989: 1): this was an idea he could easily understand. A few days later we met in my room and for several hours continuously he told his story with great feeling. His language and style of delivery were simple and his vocabulary very limited, and he liked to repeat himself to give a certain argument a particular weight. Never the less, he gave a lively portrayal not only of himself but of events and people in Rawain since the first decades of the 20th century.

How did Sundar Singh construct his personal story? Most obviously, he did not present his story as a chronological sequence of events, drawing a line from his birth to the present day and focusing exclusively on his individual development. Instead, he picked up and communicated *episodes* which seem either to have shaped his life and experience or which he regarded as suitable for the depiction of particular times, or to illustrate social and economic changes in the region. To adopt an expression of the German sociologist Joachim Matthes, who conducted biographical research in Southeast Asia, Sundar Singh narrated *stories from his life* (*Geschichten aus dem Leben*) and did not tell a life history (*Lebensgeschichte*) (Matthes 1984: 286-7). Matthes, like Crapanzano before him, emphasizes that the life history is a distinctly Western genre. Like the autobiography and the biography, it shapes a particular pre-selected range of data *retrospectively* into a meaningful *totality*. To assume the universal validity of the Western paradigm would be an example of ethnocentrism.

Although Sundar Singh's narrative does not produce a meaningful totality, every single episode he talked about had a particular meaning for his personal development and/or the development of the local society of which he felt himself to be a part. Thus, many of the episodes narrated by Sundar Singh seemed to be significant not only as stories of a particular time of his life, but, in retrospect, as episodes

which had had an effect on the present and could even have consequences for the future. Some examples follow, which demonstrate how Sundar Singh organized his personal text.

Episodes from Sundar Singh's personal life

In his personal story, Sundar Singh gave lengthy details of his lineage and family. He talked about his three marriages, about his children, and about their education and careers. He also mentioned that ten children had died in their early years, and reflected on the medical situation and the status of women in those days. But it was most fascinating to see how he evoked a particular image of himself as a particular and unique person, picking out isolated episodes of his life.

Childhood and the question of education – an early turning point

Sundar Singh presented his early childhood as a time of freedom from worries and responsibilities, symbolically illustrating it by praising the abundance of food:

In those days we had enough cattle. In the jungle there were good pastures... We had plenty of ghee [clarified butter] and milk. Our uncle used to stay with the cattle. We had three or four water buffaloes and eight, nine, sometimes twelve cows, they all gave milk. There was ghee and milk in abundance. We consumed milk and ghee from our own cattle. We ate according to our own desire. Neither grandmother nor mother nor the uncle gave us food. It was not like that. From our own hands we ate, according to our own desire. We ate as much as the heart demanded. Then we grew and became older...⁵

These happy days ended when the children grew older and were expected either to go to school or to help with the family work. Sundar Singh explained that in former times it was unusual for children to be sent to school. He was one of the few boys who got a chance to study, because his parents were well off and belonged to the leading families in the village. One basic school was within reach of the village, but without roads the way was long and arduous. Because of these difficulties Sundar Singh did not start attending classes until he was ten or eleven years old. At the age of fourteen he passed the examinations and the question of his future arose.

I said to my father that I wanted to continue my studies. Affectionately, my father answered: "Son, if you are interested to study you can do it, but what about your food?" There was no junior school in Rawain and to continue one's studies one had to go to Uttarkashi... Pitaji [Father] said: "What to do

⁵ I have translated this and the following quotations from local Pahari.

for your food?” Pitaji was *mālguzār* in those days. “Son, what can I do? If you say that I should provide the rations I will bring them.” No cars were available in those days, also no mules. There was no road in the beginning. Then I made up my mind that it would be not right for my father to provide food for me, to expect him to bring the rations all the way from the village to Uttarkashi just so that I could study. And later I would go away to search employment. The whole idea did not please me. I said to myself: “No! Leave it, don’t go to Uttarkashi for studies!” So I did not go and from that very day I used to climb with the cattle to the grazing grounds. I worked in the house, I did agricultural work. At fourteen I finished the basic school, and at fourteen I started to graze the buffaloes...

Although villagers’ options were limited in the days of the Tehri kingdom, Sundar Singh got the opportunity to visit the basic school and, because he was a bright pupil, he had a real chance to continue his studies. According to his narrative it was his own decision to give up the idea of further studies because he did not want to cause his father and his family trouble. He deliberately chose the life of a farmer, which also meant staying in the village and taking over responsibility for the family. Sundar Singh’s decision, taken at the young age of fourteen, shaped his life and future: it was an early but important turning point in his life. It was the first episode in our long session he talked about, and apparently there was a special reason for this. It seems that he wanted to explain why he had turned out into the person he was: a villager and farmer with responsibilities and farsightedness. Although he was deeply rooted in his region, upholding tradition and the local way of life, he was also a man who was able to transcend the boundaries of the village intellectually, a person who knew about the possibilities he had not grasped, but was neither unhappy nor discontented.

A man of personal courage

Basically, Sundar Singh tried to portray himself as a person who is upright and honest (“*mairiṃ svayaṃ bilkul sacchā ādmī huṃ*”), who does not accept injustice or unfair behaviour, and who stands up for his principles. A story from the day of his final examinations in the basic school was intended to give evidence of his personal courage:

It was the day of our examination. The first paper we had to write was on mathematics. When I saw the first question I was stunned. I said to myself: “Why did they ask us this question? It is a question for a high school student!” ... When the SDM [Senior District Magistrate] passed by I took my paper and stood up. I said: “Sahib, I have a problem.” The SDM answered:

“What is the matter?” You must know, I was always a good student, especially in maths. I said: “The first question of this paper can only be solved by a high school student. I will close my pen and go home. Why do you bring us into trouble with this question?” The SDM said: “Give me the paper.” I gave him my paper. The SDM looked at the paper and then said: “Children, you should all skip that question.”

Sundar Singh mentioned proudly that he was lauded by all students and also the teachers for his courage: “*Shabash*, son, very good.” They shook hands with me, they slapped my back, “*shabash*, son, *shabash*!”

Personal worldview and opinions

When I asked Sundar Singh to tell about moments and events which made him extremely happy or sad he took the opportunity to elaborate on what I would call his personal ‘philosophy’, which seems to have guided his life, especially in later years:

The moments and occasions which I remember, they are all equal for me. They are equal because I had no serious quarrel with anybody and nobody did anything really evil to me. There is a time for happiness and a time for sadness. I felt as much happiness as sadness. Once I found a book on philosophical discourse. There it was written: “For a man happiness and grief should be equal. If he experiences something which is profitable for him he will have a good time; if he experiences something bad then he will have a sad time. All days are given to us by God. In good and bad days one should be happy.” ... In this book it was also written that there are four places which are best for a man: the banks of a river, the stable of the cattle, the fruit orchard, and the natural forest. These are the four best places for ascetic practices (*tapasyā*). God has told us that the orchard and the stable are good for *tapasyā*. I have both: the stable and the orchard.

Sundar Singh confessed that some people considered him mad because he did not like to come to the bazaar and most of the days lived near the orchards in his *chānī* (a small hut or a stable with an attached room located in the fields or orchards). “I am not against the bazaar”, he asserted, “Everybody must choose the place he wants to live. But for myself the bazaar is not the right place”:

In the bazaar one meets one person, a second, a third person, one meets boozers, hunters, all sorts of people. Here I don’t have such problems. In my orchard I find peace. Here only God cares for me. Therefore I am always happy.

Sundar Singh depicted himself as a person who clings to the religious traditions and finds his spiritual fulfilment. He evoked the image of a simple villager who possesses little formal knowledge but is blessed with ‘wisdom’. Sundar Singh always attempted to achieve a congruence between his philosophy and his way of living. In the middle of his life, when he was selected as the *wazīr* of the deity, he became a strong devotee of the god and took to a very simple life. He never consumed meat or alcoholic drinks, he never ate meals in restaurants, he only wore traditional clothes, he truly preferred to live and work in the orchards, and he always seemed a well-balanced person. In this respect Sundar Singh reminded me of M.K. Gandhi who once stated: “My life is my message.”

Episodes concerning local society

Experiences of regional marginalization—a lesson for today

In several episodes Sundar Singh referred to the hardships of village life in the time of the Tehri Raja. One issue was the infrastructural marginalization of the region. Sundar Singh explained that during his early childhood no shops existed in the upper Yamuna valley (the first one opened around 1930), the villagers had to buy necessary goods like salt, sugar, spices, and clothes from Chakrata (Jaunsar). There were no roads and the villagers were forced to walk on foot; on their way back they had to carry their purchases. Much later, a small road for mules was constructed and a few goods could be brought on horseback. In the early fifties villagers from the Yamuna Valley went to Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh and seat of the U.P. Government, to apply for the construction of a road.

Our father, Rawaltaji, Daulatram of Kotiyal, and Premlal Shah of Balari, they went three times to Lucknow. In these days Govind Ballabh Pant [from Kumaon] was the Chief Minister of U.P. They went to ask for the construction of a road. But the Baniyas of Chakrata opposed our application. They suppressed our demands. They argued: “If the road is constructed our development will come to an end.” The Baniyas were rich people. They have brought our demands to an end.

Sundar Singh added that a road was built from Dharasu (in the Bagirathi valley) to Barkot (in the Yamuna valley) only after 1960. In his opinion, this was done by mistake: “the road was supposed to be built from Dharasu to Bhatwari, but somebody had mentioned the wrong name in the papers.” Sundar Singh is convinced that if it had not been for that mistake nobody would have even thought of constructing a road to the upper Yamuna valley.

The experience of marginalization and the fruitlessness of demands for local devel-

opment in earlier days seemed to have prompted Sundar Singh to take up the issue of political autonomy for Uttarakhand which flared up in 1994 and mobilized large parts of the hill population. He expressed the hopes and visions of many Paharis when he affirmed that in an autonomous hill state the demands of the population could not be ignored any longer. He seemed convinced that all the ministers would be Paharis, that they would understand the problems and needs of the villagers, and that they would jointly work for regional development:

If we achieve our autonomous state of Uttarakhand, then we will get all sorts of facilities. With the present people in power we won't get development. We never had a person from here who could express our demands and interests. From here [Garhwal] no influential Minister came who would have been able to support us, to push our demands through... So, if our Uttarakhand state is created, we wish that our children will find employment, that we will get facilities like factories, so that our children will get their *rozā roṭī*, their daily food...

Depicting the past and the present: aspects of development, aspects of change

In various contexts, Sundar Singh referred to the social and economic changes he had experienced during his lifetime. I encouraged him to compare the local way of life during the time of the Raja of Tehri Garhwal with the present situation. Although a slight tendency to appreciate the olden times prevailed, especially as far as morality was concerned, Sundar Singh tried to avoid looking back with uncritical nostalgia. He endeavoured to give a well-balanced judgement by acknowledging the weaknesses as well as the strengths of each period. I will illustrate his way of arguing with reference to three topics.

Population growth

Sundar Singh repeatedly mentioned that in his childhood the people had sufficient to eat. There were no droughts, the harvests were good, and the number of people was limited:

The population was small in those days. People were so few, you see my father had only two sons. The whole family counted four members. Then after marriage we became six. And later the children were born, my brother had five children. I had four children. In those days there was no question of sterilization. See, from one father so many people derived. Now see the grandchildren, how many grandsons and granddaughters were born. If each of our sons gets only two children you will count eighteen grandchildren.

I asked Sundar Singh to tell me about his explanation for the low population figures in earlier times and he started to elaborate on this issue at length. He mentioned the tradition of polyandry as the first reason. This, he said, was successively abandoned with increasing mobility and the widening of marriage networks. People suffered heavily from syphilis. Men as well as women were infected and many children died in the womb or shortly after they were born. The other disease which caused many deaths was malaria. Today the government has succeeded in its efforts to prevent both diseases and the untimely death of children and adults. The population increased steadily, but, so said Sundar Singh, the agricultural land was limited. The times when food was abundant were over and people had to search for additional sources of income to secure their livelihood.

A cash economy

Although the villagers had plenty to eat in the olden days, money (cash) was in short supply and people often had no choice other than to sell jewellery when they needed medical help, or when they wanted to give their children some education. The opportunities to earn money were extremely limited:

People could get money by selling one of their sheep or goats, they could do some labour work... The cutting of railway sleepers started later. In those days we were children, I was 19 years old. In those days we saw a person in Kanseru, his name was Hukam Singh, he was a forest contractor. He took a contract for the preparation of sleepers. And from then on people started to earn money... A good part of the money in Rawain came from the work of sleeper cutting.

With the introduction of cash crops, Sundar Singh continued, the economic situation in Rawain improved and now each family had at least some money at its disposal. Sundar Singh recalled in detail the process of horticultural development in his as well as the neighbouring villages. He listed when, where, and by which family each cash crop had been propagated first. The main cash crops were potatoes (since 1935), apples (since 1950) and peas (since the mid-1980s).

Morality and sociality

According to Sundar Singh, population growth and the cash economy had had negative effects on the local communities:

In my opinion the times of the Raja were better. In those days there was a law and nobody could manipulate it. The only important thing was that in those days we did not enjoy any development... Now we get sufficient development, in those days there was nothing... The law of the Maharaja

was good and in those days the people loved each other, the people were good as well. But now the population has increased, how can so many people love each other, how can they keep good relationships? ...Formerly the people lived close together, they used to come to each other's house—now people have started to give invitations. That was not the case in those days. Now everybody eats and drinks from his own money... That was not so formerly, in all places were guests, the people loved each other... But today, how to provide food and drink for so many people, now the population has increased?

In those days there was a lot of honesty (trustworthiness) amongst the people. And today we have a lot of development, people have become aware [of their possibilities]. At present we have much development, but in the olden times there was honesty (*imāndārī*) and truth (*sacchāī*). Now we don't have truth.

Two aspects of this passage are important. First, as far as morality and obedience were concerned, Sundar Singh praised the times of the Raja. These qualities had been lost in the course of the development process. Economic and social development strengthened individuality and selfishness. In the endeavour to earn money and wealth (and to improve their own status), people tried to outdo each other. They cheated, they bribed, they 'manipulated' the law. Sundar Singh's statement can also be read as a complaint about the decline of traditional social hierarchies. Development had facilitated the upward mobility of lower castes and less reputable families, and the former leading groups and families (like his own) tended to lose their status. Second, the population growth of recent decades had added to the decline of traditional values: it undermined the particular form of village sociality, the closeness of people, their brotherhood. It favoured selfishness and the decrease of honesty.

Conclusion

The comparison between the past and the present seems to be central to Sundar Singh's narrative, not only because I, the anthropologist, encouraged him to elaborate on this topic, but also because it was very much his own concern. For Sundar Singh, the past and the present were each characterized by a basically positive but exclusive feature: development marked the present, truth and honesty the past. Nevertheless, Sundar Singh conveyed that in each period there were two sides to the coin. Under the rule of the Raja, people were honest but there was no development: the villagers in Rawain suffered from a lack of education, money, and infrastructure, they felt marginalized and oppressed. In modern times the villagers

enjoyed the fruits of development and the widening of life chances, but they had lost their honesty and sociality. The tension between development and truth remains an unsolved problem, an ambivalence in society. But, personally, Sundar Singh seemed to have found a way out of the dilemma. As an individual he tried to be honest, unselfish, and true by leading a simple life, spending money on good causes (education, financing rituals) and encouraging his co-villagers to do the same.

With the help of several examples I have tried to show that Sundar Singh narrated his life by presenting singular episodes which he thought would illuminate his personality and individuality as well as the particular context in which his life developed (the geographical place, the family, the society). Sundar Singh narrated personal (hi)stories, not a life history. These histories are like pieces of a puzzle. The anthropologist can try to organize the pieces in an endeavour to approach the totality of life and context, but the totality can never be fully grasped. The life history always remains fragmentary.

Gaura Devi: a biography

Gaura Devi, a Bhotiya woman, was born in 1924 in Lata, to the east of Joshimath. At the age of twelve she married into Raini, a neighbouring village. When a forest contractor arrived with his crew to fell the forest at Raini in 1974, Gaura Devi, then a widow of 50, led the village women to the forest to protect the trees. The campaign was successful and the news of the rescue of the Raini forest gave further boost to the Chipko struggle. But for Gaura Devi herself the success was ambivalent. As the national and international popularity of the Chipko movement and its most well-known leaders C.P. Bhatt and S. Bahuguna increased, Gaura Devi became popular as well. Chandi Prasad Bhatt, in particular, presented Gaura Devi to the public at occasions such as conferences, public meetings, and celebrations of awards,⁶ because she was useful to strengthen the image of the movement. As a village woman she represented in an ideal way the central features of the Chipko āndolan as they were popularized in the media: an ecological stance, the self-confidence of women as the true protectors of nature, and the spontaneity and power of the local population. G.S. Rawat, the communist Block Pramukh of the region who was

⁶ According to the villagers of Raini, a number of awards were offered to Gaura Devi and the women from Raini, the most famous being a national award and the Swedish 'Right Livelihood Award'. The latter was handed out to Sunderlal Bahuguna, while the national award was presented by Rajiv Gandhi to Chandi Prasad Bhatt in Delhi. The village people complained that in all cases the award money went into the hands of the 'leaders', and that neither Gaura Devi nor the village women ever saw a single coin. Referring to Gaura Devi they added: 'Sirf nām uṭhāyā, paise khāyā' ('only the name was raised, the money was swallowed').

himself deeply involved in the Raini struggle (though this was not highlighted in the media), perceived selfish motives behind the public display of Gaura Devi. In an interview I conducted with him in 1994, he affirmed that Chandi Prasad Bhatt was instrumental in turning Gaura Devi into a popular figure through his writings and through public display. Nevertheless, Rawat was convinced that this was not done to underline the achievements of Gaura Devi and other village people, but to increase the popularity of the movement, and especially to popularize the name of Bhatt and his mobilization work which, Bhatt claimed, laid the basis for the villagers' success. Whereas Rawat and village people from Raini confirmed that Gaura Devi had accompanied Bhatt on many occasions, they denied that she had been together with Sunderlal Bahuguna. The latter was suspected of having shown a 'false (*nakkali*) Gaura' to the public, i.e. to have passed off a woman from the Tehri region as Gaura Devi on one (or even more) occasion.

The translocal admiration for Gaura Devi did not have a local correspondence. While she was highly respected during the Chipko struggle, many people, especially those from neighbouring villages, became suspicious when she started to travel and receive awards. With her growing popularity, Gaura Devi seemed to have stirred up feelings of rivalry and envy because she was supposed to have received amounts of money which (according to her critics) she then spent only for her own profit or for that of Raini and her co-villagers. But the people from Raini affirmed that Gaura Devi took nothing, pointing to the poor situation of her family and the condition of the village. They described her as an absolutely upright woman (*sīdhī aurat*) who personally and as president of the women's council (*mahilā mangal dal*) cared about the welfare of the village and felt responsible for the forest as the basis of their livelihood. When she travelled with Bhatt she did not suspect him of taking any advantage of her company, she only wanted to support and to strengthen the forest issue.

The life of Gaura Devi has been taken up in the following poem by Dhansingh Rana from Lata village:

‘Gaura Devi’ (my translation from the local Pahari)

Today, Gaura, the people remember you,
 Today again our environment is exposed to destruction.
 You are benevolent, you come to our minds.
 I will narrate about your life, just a few things:
 In 1924, in the month of Sāwan
 You were born in Lata village.
 Since your childhood you have been in trouble.
 Your mother was already dead, then the *mausi*⁷ came.
 Your *mausi* was there, but you felt like an orphan.
 At twelve, still a child, you got married,
 but only for a short while could you enjoy your husband’s company.
 You bore one child, then your husband died.
 Oh Gaura, your life was nothing but big trouble.
 Since your early days you have experienced so much grief.
 Together with the other children you could have learned something,
 but you were poor and barred from education.
 Always you have been poor, but never without honour and wisdom.
 You cared for all the villages during both happiness and grief,
 you never cared for yourself, only for others.
 The village people paid you a lot of respect.
 In 1970 there was a women’s meeting and you were elected as president
 unanimously.
 Nobody voted against you.

 In the whole world people are busy cutting down the jungle,
 and in the hills the contractor system is a heavy burden.

⁷ *mausi* : mother’s sister, maternal aunt.

In 1973, in the month of October,
 Bhalla-Bhai came to the Raini jungle.
 Big tents arrived and trucks with provisions.
 Hundreds of workers came and with them
 the saws and the *kulhārīs*.⁸
 The innocent trees—the people of the whole area started to worry about
 them.
 In those times Govind Singh was our Block leader.
 When he heard the news from Gaura, he hurried to Raini.
 It came to his mind to print a pamphlet.
 The songs and slogans sung by the people spread quickly.
 Employees of the Forest Department and workers, they had already moved
 into the forest,
 they laid ready their saws and *kulhārīs*.
 It was Gaura, who called upon the people: “Save the forest!”,
 who inspired the women to come to the forest.
 With their bare hands the women went to the jungle
 and gave the *janglāts*⁹ and *chirānīs*⁹ to understand
 that they had sworn to allow them nothing.

Gaura realized the unity and the confidence of the women
 and like the voice of the forest she spoke up:
 “Do not break our affinity to the forest, rooted since generations.
 Sisters, let yourselves be cut with the trees, but do not abandon and leave.
 Cling to the trees, hug them, but don’t let them be cut.
 These, the properties of the hills—don’t let them steal them.
 Women, you who are the beloveds of the forest, hug the trees!”
 The *chirānīs* got discouraged and they turned back.
 The people of the region assembled,

⁸ *kulhārī* : axe.

⁹ *janglāt*: forest worker; *chirānī* : the person who cuts the railway sleepers.

the villages one after the other took the responsibility as *chaukidārs*,¹⁰
 day by day people demonstrated at the edge of the forest.
 All assembled and thought carefully,
 they decided: The Block Pramukh should be our adviser.
 From Gopeshwar they brought Bhatt, as a reporter.
 Bhattji took photographs, and he wrote in the newspapers.
 In the whole country the news from our forest spread.
 As long as the jungle remains, Gaura, your memory too will remain.
Lākhs of money have been offered to you, but you refused it.
 Looking at the bribes your face turned red in anger.
*Māldārs*¹¹ and *janglāts* disappeared from our region.
 Women! With your bare hands you fulfilled a great mission.
 Many nations have offered awards to you, Gaura.
 You were called to Delhi and your name was made eminent,
 when Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi presented you with an award.
 The people around you broke your trust
 and had no scruples about usurping your award.
 Your service has been unselfish and you were pure of heart.
 They have taken your award, without any regret,
 without caring for you and for your respect.
 In your whole life you never talked badly of others,
 your selfless actions resulted in your remaining poor.
 In 1991, when you were ill, nobody looked after you.
 Without any money you had no chance to get healed.
 Mother of the greenery, Gaura, you went to heaven.
 Death called upon you and you went empty-handed.
 Today your children are living poor.
 You are like Bhagwati, Gaura, you have done great work.
 As long as the earth exists your name will remain.

¹⁰ *chaukidār*: watchman.

¹¹ *māldār*: wealthy person.

In the name of the environment people exploit the world.
 Still today in your hills the forests are cut.
 Take birth again, Gaura, and fly into rage,
 no matter where, but take birth again and fly into rage.
 In this world of injustice, show your miracle again.

Dhansingh Rana's poetical reconstruction of Gaura Devi's life follows a guiding pattern: he presents it as the life of a martyr and a saint and shapes the events in her life into a coherent biographical picture.

The introductory and concluding lines of the poem function as parentheses. They take up the issue of the worldwide exploitation and destruction of the environment and so explain and justify the remembrance of Gaura Devi: she was the outstanding person who fought against the exploiters of nature, unselfishly and non-violently. Rana evokes a divine image of Gaura Devi, when he urges her to take birth again and to help human beings in their struggle against injustice once more. His words sound like an invocation of a deity who is able to incarnate herself as a living being, in order to fulfil a mission to save the world from the evils which threaten it.

The main body of the poem narrates central episodes in Gaura's life. These episodes are organized as a sequence of suffering. The suffering takes two different forms. On the one hand Gaura has to meet her fate: her mother died, she felt like an orphan, she married while still a child, her husband died, she was poor and could not get an education. On the other hand, she had to suffer from the evil-mindedness of human beings. She was exploited and cheated by those in whom she had full confidence: the Chipko leaders whom she supported, and the village people whom she helped to save the jungle, the basis of their livelihood. Nobody cared for her at the end when she was ill and helpless, she was forgotten by all of them and had to die lonely and poor. Scattered through the poem there are statements about Gaura Devi's personal character: she is distinguished by honesty, wisdom, unselfishness, she is characterized as somebody who always cared for others, never for herself. These positive statements are closely knitted together with descriptions of her suffering so as to throw light on the injustice of her fate and the way people dealt with her.

An important issue in the poem is the narration of the Chipko struggle to save the Raini forest. This was when Gaura Devi's charisma became public: she led the women to the jungle, she spoke up "like the voice of the forest" and urged them to oppose the contractors and to fight to rescue the forest as a part of the habitat of the community, as the property of the hills and the hill people. The time of the

struggle is presented as the zenith of her life. As a widely and deeply respected woman, she was born to achieve the high goal of saving the forest. In this very moment her existence gained its ultimate significance, it was “that magic time” in her life.¹² Gaura Devi could take up the role of a ‘fighter’ on the forefront because she was a widow. She was not bound by the restrictions linked with the traditional role of a woman, who is usually controlled and limited in her actions by the men of the family. The respect she was given as president of the women’s council, and the admiration of the public after the successful Raini struggle, could compensate for her lack of recognition as a woman fulfilling her ‘natural’ role as a wife and the mother of many children.

Dhansingh Rana’s poem about Gaura Devi does not illustrate the life of an ordinary Pahari woman. It presents the biography of an exceptional woman; a woman who could become exceptional because of the socio-economic circumstances she experienced—the commercial exploitation of local resources in Garhwal—and the particular situation she had to face when her own forest was threatened and had to be defended against the contractors. By leading the struggle and achieving success, Gaura’s life became meaningful in a private and in a public dimension. But by being misused, her suffering, which seems to have been her karma, continued. She returned into poverty and fell into oblivion. The circle was closed. Dhansingh constructed Gaura’s life from fragments, but the life, in contrast to that of Sundar Singh, does not remain fragmented. It is meant to impress the reader and listener as a meaningful totality, communicating a message: the call to respect nature and humans alike.

Conclusion

The narrators of these two life histories refer to periods or events which caused considerable structural (political and economic) changes, as well as changes in the consciousness of individuals and communities. Their narratives focus on those aspects of their lives which were of personal significance, but they also permit insights into a particular socio-historical constellation.

Sundar Singh gives a vivid picture of living conditions in the princely state of Tehri Garhwal which corresponds in many respects with academic findings (see Rawat 1989, Saklani 1987). In the 1930s and 1940s 92 percent of the population of Garhwal

¹² Kannabiran and Lalitha (1989) have shown how women remember the Telengana struggle (1946-51) as an outstanding time in their life. During the struggle they attended meetings, they were taught to read and write, they discussed political questions. They suddenly felt propelled into a situation “when everything entered the realm of possibility” (1989: 185).

still had to rely on agriculture for their livelihood. Trade on a limited scale between the interior hill regions and the Himalayan foothills and plains was necessary for the villagers to get sugar, salt, and clothing. Forest work and military service were the only ways to earn an additional monetary income. Communications, education, and health care were extremely poor in Tehri Garhwal. In 1940, two motorable roads linked pilgrimage places along the river Ganga (Haridwar, Rishikesh, Deoprayag) with the towns in the core region of the state (Kirti Nagar, Narendra Nagar, Tehri). Only ten post offices and two telegraph offices served an inhabited area of about 4,000 square miles and a population of over 500,000 people (Annual Progress Report 1943-44). In 1944, Tehri Garhwal had 270 elementary schools, six middle schools, and one intermediate college. In 1943 there were 23 medical institutions: these comprised four hospitals and three dispensaries, located in towns, and 16 ayurvedic centres, located in the countryside. Historians mention small pox and leprosy as the main diseases, and in this respect they contradict Sundar Singh.

Efforts to ‘develop’ the hill regions of Garhwal and Kumaon (which became part of Uttar Pradesh after independence) started in the mid-1960s and were stimulated primarily by national interests. After the Indo-Chinese conflict in 1962, the government felt the urge to make the region ‘accessible’ for military, administrative and commercial purposes, and especially to facilitate the exploitation of the natural resources (forests, electric power) for the industrial benefit of the whole country. Additionally, the economic development of ‘backward areas’ was part of the general planning process, and this included activities in welfare and education, agricultural diversification, and increase of productivity (for example the propagation of cash crops and the use of fertilizers and pesticides).

Developmental efforts went along with an increasing confrontation of the hill population with ‘modernity’: that is, with discourses, practices, structures of power, and ways of life which were different from those with which the hill people were familiar. This encounter promoted a learning process which enabled the people not only to evaluate the forms and presentations of modernity but also to look at their own society in a reflexive, distanced, and critical way. The Pahari way of life lost its self-evident character and people started to compare different worlds critically, and to decide and vote consciously for (or against) a particular way of life.¹³

For Sundar Singh, ‘development’ had changed the moral and normative constitution of hill society. Selfishness had largely replaced honesty, truth and brotherhood—values which he felt had long served to distinguish the hills from the plains. Sundar Singh’s view is not an isolated one. In the context of my research on the

¹³ For a discussion of the concept of modernity and the encounter of hill people with modernity, see Linkenbach (2000b).

Uttarakhand autonomy movement which inflamed the hills in 1994 and 1995, I conducted a number of interviews in different parts of Garhwal and Kumaon. Most of my respondents complained that brotherhood and honesty were continuously declining in the hills and expressed fears about the ongoing erosion of solidarity and community life, which were still seen as strong markers of Pahari identity.¹⁴

While Sundar Singh comments on a long-term process of development in the hills, the song narrating Gaura Devi's life refers to a particular historical event: the Chipko struggle in Raini. Gaura Devi's life is constructed so that her activities during the protest campaigns appear as its climax. But, although the Chipko campaign in Raini seems to have been very much her struggle, it becomes clear that the Chipko movement against the commercial felling of forests and the erosion of local rights of forest use is a major concern for hill dwellers in certain other parts of Garhwal and Kumaon too. Dhan Singh's song has equally to be interpreted as a comment on the process of awakening among sections of the hill people and their increasing willingness to fight for their rights and for their future. As a highly influential and resolute person, Gaura Devi took the lead in a particularly crucial campaign, but the Chipko movement was a sequence of campaigns in different parts of Garhwal and Kumaon, and it involved a number of people in towns and in the countryside.

Today, the landscape of thought and action in Garhwal is characterized by a number of partly conflicting local discourses on forest, ecology, and development, as well as by numerous local initiatives, projects, and strategies to translate ideas into action. The Chipko *āndolan* was formative for most of these local discourses and practices and has gained the status of a 'key event'. Against the background of today's experiences, the Chipko *āndolan* is interpreted retrospectively in various personal and collective accounts as a turning point which altered state policies and collective strategies as well as individual life histories (see Linkenbach 2000b). For those who participated in or supported the movement, the Chipko *āndolan* represents a part of their personal biography: they memorize and represent it as a crucial period in their lifetime.

Dhan Singh's narrative on Gaura Devi is only one account, albeit an extremely elaborate one, of the Chipko times. It mirrors the importance of the period and highlights one of its most influential fighters. Gaura Devi is represented as the person who first and foremost symbolizes the Chipko struggle in her locality. But due to her international publicity she is also amongst the central figures symbolizing the struggle in India and abroad.

¹⁴I have discussed aspects of identity construction, as well as people's visions for the design and functioning of a separate hill state, in Linkenbach (forthcoming).

For a long time, biographical research on India had to struggle with what I want to call the 'Dumontian legacy'. Louis Dumont has distinguished two meanings of the term 'individual': the empirical individual, i.e. the self-conscious physical entity, and the individual as cultural value, i.e. the social concept of a unique and indivisible unity. The latter is what Marcel Mauss called 'person' (La Fontaine 1985: 124). Dumont argues that whereas (egalitarian) Western society is based on freedom and the free will of the individual (or person), (hierarchical) Indian society is based on holistic identities and collective interests. Therefore, any approach to Indian society that focuses on the individual is misconceived (Mines 1994: 5). But from the very beginning this view provoked disagreement. Mines asks whether it is acceptable that the idea of the individual can only have one socially valued manifestation: that of Western individualism? What if Indians recognize individuality, but do not value individualism? (Mines 1994: 5-6) And I would add: Can individualism or personhood only be proved by bringing one's ego into focus? I have presented two personal histories which clearly illustrate the personal strength of the protagonists. But when Sundar Singh presents himself as a particular person, or when Gaura Devi is represented as a Chipko fighter, their actions and decisions seem not to be based on ego-centred motifs. The Western ideal (prominent in Western biographical research) of planning or directing one's life according to an ideal of self-realization does not hold for them. Mines (1994: 179ff) has tried to show that the most valued expressions of individuality or personhood in Tamil Nadu are responsibility, eminence, and generosity. My observations from the Himalayas may support this view. Sundar Singh's and Gaura Devi's personal histories illustrate that it was a sense of responsibility towards society (family, village) and nature in particular which guided their personal decisions and actions, and which set up the unique personalities (individualities) of the protagonists, rather than their concern for their isolated lives and careers.

References

- Bude, Heinz, 1987. *Deutsche Karrieren: Lebenskonstruktionen sozialer Aufsteiger aus der Flakhelfer-Generation*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp.
- Crapanzano, Vincent, 1977. 'The Life History in Anthropological Field Work' *Anthropology and Humanism Quarterly* 2: 3-7.
- Kannabiran, Vasantha and K. Lalitha 1989. 'That Magic Time: Women in the Telangana people's struggle' in *Recasting Women: Essays in colonial history*, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, pp. 180-203. New Delhi: Kali for Women.
- La Fontaine, J.S. 1985. 'Person and Individual: Some anthropological reflections' in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, philosophy, history*, edited by Michael Carrithers, Steven Collins and Steven Lukes, pp. 123-40. Cambridge etc.: Cambridge University Press.
- Linkenbach, Antje 2000a. 'Anthropology of Modernity: Projects and Contexts' *Thesis Eleven* 61: 41-63.
- Linkenbach, Antje 2000b. 'Appropriating the Himalayan Forest: Ecology and Resistance in Garhwal (North India)'. Habilitation thesis, University of Heidelberg (to be published).
- Linkenbach, Antje forthcoming. 'Shaking the State by Making a (New) State: Social movements and the quest for autonomy in the central Himalayas (India)' *Sociologus* (2002.1)
- Matthes, Joachim 1984. 'Über die Arbeit mit lebensgeschichtlichen Erzählungen in einer nicht-westlichen Kultur'. In *Biographie und soziale Wirklichkeit*, edited by Martin Kohli and G. Robert, pp. 284-95. Stuttgart: Metzler.
- Mines, Mattison 1994. *Public Faces, Private Voices: Community and individuality in South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Mirza, Sarah and Margaret Strobel (eds) 1989. *Three Swaheli Women: Life histories from Mombasa, Kenya*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Rawat, Ajay S. 1989. *History of Garhwal 1358-1947: An erstwhile kingdom in the Himalayas*. New Delhi: New Publishing Company.
- Saklani, Atul 1987. *The History of a Himalayan Princely State: Change, conflicts, and awakening: An interpretative history of princely state of Tehri Garhwal, U. P., AD 1815-1949*. Delhi: Durga Publications.