



A glimpse of the majestic yet treacherous Bhagirathi River
near Gangotri Temple

CONFRONTING NATURE'S FURY:

Surviving the Unforeseen in the Himalayan Wilderness

-Deepali Bansal

I have been working in the landscape of Gangotri National Park (GNP) since 2022, visiting monthly from May to November each year to conduct experiments on assessing the impacts of climate warming on soil and ecosystem respiration and plant cover abundance under the NMSHE Phase II project. Additionally, I am also enrolled as a PhD Candidate at AcSIR-Wildlife Institute of India since January 2023. Each month brings its own views and challenges, and despite numerous visits, my enthusiasm remains high—perhaps even greater than during my first visit. Each trip presents unique intra-monthly variations (across years) and a new set of challenges.

On the morning of Sunday, June 30th, 2024, I began my journey from WII Dehradun with an intern, Aditi Kishore, and three field assistants. We reached Gangotri - a small temple town in Uttarakhand - that same night, experiencing less traffic than usual, likely due to the looming monsoon season. Upon

arrival, the ferocity of the Bhagirathi River struck me; I had never seen it flow so intensely in the past two years. According to locals, the monsoon had still not arrived, and yet the flow was more than expected, mainly due to melting snow and glaciers.

On Monday, July 1st, we started our trek from Gangotri to Bhojbasa (a campground in Uttarakhand) at 7 am, observing the phenology of selected sub-alpine and alpine flora along the way. We reached Bhojbasa by 3 pm. Although it felt unusually hot, the sunny weather was a relief. The field assistants associated with the National Institute of Hydrology (NIH) and Wadia Institute of Himalayan Geology (WIHG) claimed that this July is surprisingly hotter than the earlier ones.

We began our research work the next day so as to complete it before the monsoon or before the peak festive season (*kanwar*). It rained intermittently on July 3rd and 4th, causing some concern, following which on July 4th, we learnt of a shocking news: the temporary bridge at Chirbasa - composed of two small, interconnected bridges - had been swept away. There was talk that two *kanwariyas* (devotees) had been carried away by the River, although this information was initially unconfirmed. A wave of panic and pain flowed through me, but as the team leader, I did not express these emotions as I could not have let the team's morale falter.

Immediately, I spoke with the local forest guard Anuj, who was the sole duty officer at Bhojbasa. He escorted me to the station from where we attempted to contact the forest officials at the Kankhu check post in GNP. Forest officer Rajveer informed us about the severity of the incident and confirmed that two *kanwariyas* had indeed been swept away, and their bodies had not yet been found. The bridges had collapsed, and the river flow was intense. Rajveer ji instructed Anuj not to allow anyone to trek down from Bhojbasa until the bridge was rebuilt, a process that might take 2-3 clear days. We had planned to trek down the following day, but had now put the plan on hold. Knowing that it was unlikely for the bridge to be rebuilt in this weather, I chose to maintain a positive outlook and encouraged the team to stay motivated.

The next morning, I approached Anuj once again to request him to contact the Kankhu check post and gather updated information. After hours of trying, we finally made contact with Rajveer ji at the Kankhu check post. He explained that they had been attempting to reach Anuj since 5 in the morning, but due to the bad weather, communication via walkie-talkie had been challenging. The entire National Park area had been put on high alert, and we were ordered to evacuate the area immediately. No one was allowed to proceed beyond Bhojbasa, and everyone had to return as quickly as possible. At that moment, I recalled the three women who had identified themselves as officials from National Geographic, visiting Gaumukh. One of them was over 51 years old and was feeling under the weather when we had spoken earlier that morning. The news and evacuation order hit me hard, knowing that they were still out there.

Ensuring that all the *yatris* began their descent towards Chirbasa, I could not shake off the worry that the River's flow typically increases after 11 am, and it was already 9:45 in the morning. Imagining a temporary bridge that might have been hastily constructed, and could potentially wash away again, was just my speculation in the midst of panic. Such situations often lack complete information and clear management at the ground level. All we could do was follow the orders given and proceed cautiously.

We were informed that Deputy Range Officer Mr. Harish was stationed at Chirbasa and would assist us in crossing the River, but uncertainty lingered about how this would be managed.

I was still worried about the three women from National Geographic, along with their trek guide and porter, who were still behind us. Once the rest of the *yatris* had departed, I began trekking down. Before leaving, I instructed Anuj to ensure the safe passage of the aforementioned three women, particularly the elderly one who was slightly ill.

The descent was challenging, exacerbated by heavy rain throughout the 6-kilometer trek. Despite our diligent use of rain covers, our bags were thoroughly soaked. As a researcher and PhD candidate, it was imperative for me to prioritise not only the team's welfare but also the safety of our scientific equipment. While this may seem trivial to some, it is crucial for our research endeavours.



Trekking down from Bhojbasa to Chirbasa amidst continuous rain

Upon arriving at the incident site, I saw the River where two bridges had once stood, now swept away. *Yatris* were soaked and shivering, with the SDRF team and forest officials on the opposite bank, including Mr. Harish, whom I recognised. The weather was severe, compounded by the presence of the *kanwariyas*, devout pilgrims carrying holy Ganga water, who were in no state to rest or eat. The River, previously calm, had turned ferocious in a matter of minutes, dislodging stones and boulders along its path—a stark reminder of its immense power and unpredictability.

By the time we arrived at 11:30 in the morning, SDRF officials were struggling to extend a rope across to us and secure it to a sturdy rock on our side. Despite several attempts, they struggled to successfully deliver the rope to us. Fortunately, our field assistant



Trekking down from Bhojbasa to Chirbasa amidst continuous rain

Daleb *bhaiya*, who had some experience in handling such crises, persisted and after two grueling hours, he and the officials managed to grasp the rope mid-stream and securely fasten it to a massive boulder on our side.

It was a tense moment as the trained SDRF official crossed the River, encountering three dips and collisions with the river's stones along the way. Panic spread among us witnessing his ordeal. Recognising our lack of training and experience in such hazardous circumstances, the SDRF officer secured a second rope an hour later. The boulder on which the ropes were fastened was dangerous, perched on a moraine that could collapse at any time. Despite the risks, we had no alternative but to proceed cautiously and optimistically. Yogi and Baba pilgrims were prioritised, with four to six people from both sides gripping the ropes tightly. Each crossing individual wore a helmet and harness attached to the rope, while those on the opposing bank pulled with all their strength. They crossed slowly, one at a time. I watched carefully as the boulder shifted a few centimetres. The River's flow direction fluctuated, moving from extreme left to right and centre, accentuating my anxious state of mind.

After some *kanwariyas* crossed, I was instructed to go next, though the three women from Nat Geo

had still not arrived. Subconsciously worried about them, I wrestled with the desire to prioritise my own safety, knowing well that I could not have abandoned my own team. Aditi was visibly frightened—it being only her second trek and her first encounter with such a terrifying situation—and needed reassurance. Our assistants and I spoke with her, encouraging her that we would all soon be safe. Finally, I asked her to cross next, emphasising her safety as our priority at that moment. Reluctant yet understanding the urgency, Aditi was prepared by SDRF officials for her daunting river crossing.

She crossed the rope in a matter of minutes, and we felt relieved when she joined the SDRF and forest officials on the other side. Now it was my turn. Despite my fear, I knew I had to remain composed. I carefully balanced myself on the swaying rope while others pulled from the opposite bank. The wind whipped fiercely, and rain added to the chaos. The River roared below, stones colliding with a menacing sound. Gripping the rope tightly, I dragged my hand across its length until I finally reached the other side.



Group picture taken by the SDRF team to document those rescued during the operation

After this incident, amidst the mix of fear and adrenaline, I trembled as I walked and ended up straining the quadriceps muscles of my right leg and injuring my left knee. The remaining 9 kilometres of the trek were incredibly challenging as I had to hobble along with the support of a stick. It was a difficult ordeal, but I consider it as one of the scariest yet most thrilling adventures of my life. Throughout it all, I kept recalling the lessons my mother had taught me: never leave anyone behind, remain strong and positive regardless of the situation. She taught me that

even one weak link can shake the entire chain, and I couldn't afford to be that weak link, especially in such a critical situation.

It's truly heartbreaking to imagine the feelings of the person who witnessed two individuals being swept away. My thoughts are with them, and I join in heartfelt prayers for comfort and strength to their families and loved ones during their difficult time.

About the Author:

Deepali Bansal: is a Senior Project Fellow in the NMSHE Phase II project. She is a passionate researcher with a keen interest in understanding the effects of experimental warming on respiration and plant productivity in alpine meadows within the Western Himalaya. Her work aims to contribute to the broader field of environmental science, shedding light on the ecological consequences of climate change in these sensitive ecosystems.



A Kanwariya pilgrim crossing the River aided by the rescue team, secured with helmet and harness for safety