Preface

I first saw the Ganga at Rishikesh when I was 21. Swift, buoyant and majestic, she held the promise of youth. It was not very difficult to identify with her since she seemed 21 at Rishikesh: the knowledge of a barrage further downstream did not seem to alter her urgency to explore and water the heart of the subcontinent. Since then, my association with the river has been somewhat sublime: I have explored her through her journey, not as methodically as an adventurer, but have randomly covered the distance from the source to where the waters empty themselves into the ocean after an arduous journey through a convoluted mangrove forest. I followed the Ganga in her middle age at Bithur, where Brahma is said to have created the universe. Here, the river broadens like a middle-aged woman and allows sandbanks to flourish in her midst. Her spontaneity gives way to serenity and finally, at Calcutta (now Kolkata) she seems tired, almost sluggish but still willing to nourish. It was at Gangotri, however, that I discovered the impact that a trickle of water issuing from the snout of a glacier has on a whole nation. The birthplace of the Ganga in the Himalayas does not seem out of place: secure, strong and magnificent, the Himalayas cradle the river like a child.

However, I have rarely seen two elements of nature: the Ganga and the Himalayas drawn into contemporary political and nationalistic discourse as frequently. Controversial, polluted but always holy, the Ganga and the Himalayas have nourished generations for several centuries, marked the geographical frontiers of the nation and maintained the bio-diversity of the subcontinent (that hangs on a delicate thread). The present study is an exploration of yet another aspect of social and political life that is intertwined with the Ganga and the Himalayas. While examining the exigencies of tourism in the region, the project also seeks to highlight the
changes that have led to the destruction of forest and livelihood. What I found worth examining in particular was the ways in which the society moulds itself according to the changing political scenario while keeping the religiosity of the river alive. It is this religious fervour that propels the entire population to take a ritual bath during the Kumbh mela and congregate in the ghats of the river for months on end. The study for me was not purely a subject of academic research but also an investigation of the mysticism of natural elements in the ordinary lives of a modernising nation that provide an additional dimension to the cultural plurality of the country.

Needless to say, I am continuously perplexed with the mysticism that is accorded to the river. Recently, while visiting Rishikesh, I was alarmed to see that the sleepy township that was envisaged to be a retreat for the old and the destitute was undergoing dramatic transformation. Envisaged as a place offering respite from the frenzy and fervour of Haridwar, Rishikesh was once secluded and charming. Today, it has been overtaken by pilgrims, saints, and hippies and feels the pressure to maintain its aura of mysticism. This commercial need is further compounded by the need of the Hindu right wing to constantly assert themselves in the area. This is reflected in the appropriation of certain ceremonies to venerate the river. Haridwar is famous for a grand aarti where oil lamps are lit and floated in the river to the chants of mantras and singing of hymns. Also, Haridwar is a tirth, the air of which is considered so holy that it purifies anyone who passes through the town. Today, this grand aarti is being replicated on the banks of an elaborate ghat in Rishikesh. At the end of the aarti, the Ganga, likened to the mother is hailed (bolo Ganga maiyya ki jai). The trinity is then hailed (Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev) followed by the Nation (bolo Bharat Mata ki jai). Finally, the Universal Religious Order is glorified (bolo sanatan dharma ki jai). The order in which these
chants are culled out presumes the hierarchy of one over the other, indeed a highly aggressive manner of declaring the supremacy of the religion over all else. To this, there is a subtle economic dimension. By building ghats and performing pujas all through the course of the river, the militant right wing is also circumscribing the access of natural resources (and in this case, the essential commodity, water) to the majority (or those who conform to the Hindu faith). Minority groups and dissenters are therefore excluded. On the ecological front, the supremacy of the faith over all else, and of the Nation over environment (or nature) implies that all exploitation of natural resources for the good of either the faith or the Nation can be condoned. Infact, nature, forms the lowest rung of the hierarchy and is thus not worthy of preservation.

A journey that started at Rishikesh ended there: the revelation that the glory of the river surpassed any mysticism accorded to it, that a community simply on the basis of its veneration could not claim the river. That the need of the hour is to conserve so that the river is not lost to us forever.