



The Sarayu River in India, just one mile from Nepal, runs through a brilliant valley that will be drowned when the Pancheshwar Dam Project is complete.

RISING TIDES

THE PROTECTOR

THE MAHAKALI RIVER, ALSO COLLOQUIALLY REFERRED TO AS THE KALI RIVER, DEFINES THE BORDER BETWEEN WESTERN NEPAL AND NORTHERN INDIA. A BROAD, CREAMY-GREEN RIPARIAN GEM, THE RIVER IS NOT ONLY HOME TO A THRIVING POPULATION OF THE PRIZED GAMEFISH GOLDEN MAHSEER, BUT IS ALSO THE FOCUS OF A 1996 TREATY BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES. THE TREATY OUTLINES THE PANCHESHWAR PROJECT, A JOINT INDIA-NEPAL VISION TO CONSTRUCT THE WORLD'S HIGHEST DAM, WHICH WOULD TOWER AT 311 METERS. CONSTRUCTION HAS ALREADY BEGUN, AND WHEN COMPLETE, WILL DISPLACE 30,000 VILLAGERS AND 62 TERRACED FARMING COMMUNITIES IN INDIA ALONE. THESE HAMLETS JOINED A HINDU TEMPLE NEAR THEIR NEW HOME 1,000 FEET UNDERWATER.

IF IT'S BUILT, PANCHESHWAR DAM WILL FLOOD A MAHSEER RIVER AND DISPLACE 30,000 PEOPLE

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PHOTOGRAPHY & TEXT

The Sarayu River winds through miles of verdant forest, terraced farms, and steep canyon walls, as it courses through India on its way to the confluence with the Kali. Roiling eddies and wavetrains rich with large, dashing mahseer splay out amid the Himalayan foothills. At the confluence of the Sarayu and the Kali rests a point of rocks. On that point sits the aforementioned temple, ribbons of prayer flags and ceremonial clothing flapping in the wind. Inside that temple lives Baba.

Baba is a holy man who has committed himself to a simple life without material goods. Despite harsh winters, he hasn't worn shoes in 20 years. He has no flashlight nor headlamp, which led to a midnight tumble down 100 steps into a river, breaking

his wrist. He is a tough man with leathery soles and palms, and dreadlocks due to a lack of grooming supplies. He's lived here for decades, watching change in the river, its patterns, and its users. He views himself as its protector.

I came to fish the Sarayu with three friends: Andy Danylchuk, Patagonia ambassador, fish biologist, and professor at The University of Massachusetts Amherst; Suman Panwar, Indian native, angler, and advocate; and Aaron Alter, an American who has spent his life understanding Indian conservation and policy as it pertains to fish conservation, striving to protect all things finned. We came to the Sarayu and Kali as the first legal fishermen in two years. The river had been closed before due to

Baba, a local holy man who considers himself the river's protector, has been able to stave off poachers and bait fishermen, but he is depending on the god Shiva The Destroyer to stop the dam project.



poaching on other rivers in the region. This is something Baba doesn't tolerate.

He spoke to us in Hindi, through Panwar's translation, about the river.

"This river is special. These fish, they should be allowed to live. They cannot be taken. If I hear of someone taking the mahseer, I report it to the authorities."

Reporting poaching requires many miles of foot travel for Baba. But he feels it is worth preserving the rivers. If caught, poachers face imprisonment, or in some rare cases, even a stern beating.

"The right people come to fish. They put them back. Others feed them doughballs with hooks in them. This is very, very bad."

We were camped on the Sarayu a few hundred yards upstream from the confluence. Our outfitter arranged comfortable tents, a cook center with delicious food ranging from *dahl* to rich *saag*, and bottomless cups of chai. Local guides joined us every day as we explored the Sarayu,

looking for gold with 9-weight rods.

Each day we ambled across the bridge over the Sarayu to a gentle path that followed the river upstream. We passed locals carrying loads from their fields, and the occasional cow or monkey. The river below the path was accessible throughout the roughly 3- to 5-kilometer (2- to 3-mile) walk we'd take each day. Typically we started before sunrise to fish the morning bite. The majority of the water we passed appeared to be outstanding habitat, and we'd often fish our way back to camp in the afternoon, landing 6 to 10 fish of various sizes. Most were at least 6 pounds.

The apex of our daily trek was a giant double meander in the river where riffles laid out into slick emerald water. Here, the fishing was very productive. One morning I had a fish strike my 1/0 Zonker, run on a smooth drag, and cleanly snap my 18-pound-test leader. Minutes earlier, Alter suffered the same fate as a strike totally

straightened his hook. Panwar landed a handful here, and Danylchuk managed to glide a 20-pound mahseer to the shore.

Mahseer are stunning fish. They have half-dollar-sized scales, calloused lips from sucking nymphs from round boulders, and a golden color as rich as doubloons. Mahseer use their lips to flip round river rocks, then Hoover up the abundant invertebrates on the underside. If the Pancheshwar Dam is completed, mahseer in this watershed stand to become eradicated.

The Pancheshwar Dam will actually be two dams working in tandem, simply because that's what it will take to restrain the massive amount of water behind the primary, 311-meter-high dam. The project is expected to submerge 11,600 hectares (45 square miles) of mountain terrain, 7,600 of which (29 square miles) would be in India. However, the locals aren't accepting the project as presented. Protests have begun.

The compensation and approval process for the dam has fallen under scrutiny, as the initial meetings were held during the monsoons when local representation was poor due to high water, frequent road washouts, and difficult travel conditions. Further, the proposal documents were drafted in English, making them uninterpretable by the people who would be most affected by the project. Opponents cite the \$5 billion U.S. price tag, catastrophic risk from the submersion of five seismic zones, and destruction of habitat that currently protects an endangered tiger species. Then there's the runoff issue, deforestation, pollution, and the displacement of 30,000 people.

September 9 is Himalayan Day, a regional holiday long celebrated in the hilly states adjacent to the Himalayas. However, in recent years there's been a transformation in tradition, such that it has become a day of conflict. Senior environmentalists and activists of the state of Uttarakhand began to celebrate Himalayan Day as a way to bring recognition to the hill country. However, according to numerous published reports, the local government purportedly "grabbed [that] day for its propaganda," promoting the dam among other initiatives. Citing that the project would not only generate jobs but over 5,000 megawatts of power, the regional government remains in strong support of the project. However, the opposing Uttarakhand Parivartan Party in turn marked the day officially as Pancheshwar Dam Protest Day, staging peaceful protests.



Golden mahseer live in high-gradient rivers falling from the Himalayas. India's demand for electricity puts these fish at risk.

THE DESTROYER

The last day we fished the Sarayu was on Holi, a national holiday celebrating the triumph of good over evil in honor of the Hindu god Vishnu. Along with Prahlada and Shiva, the three comprise the holy trinity of Hinduism. In Hindu tradition it is believed that Shiva is the supreme deity who protects and transforms the universe. Also referred to as “The Destroyer,” Shiva is considered the great crusher of evil, persevering for all things peaceful.

On Holi I awoke early. The full moon had slipped behind the hills, and the Milky Way had tossed a dusty band across the sky. That night was a noisy one, as on Holi social norms and in some cases even the respect for laws go out the window. Alcohol, rarely ingested by Indians, is a popular commodity on Holi. Jeers of celebration and the whistle of the occasional firework reverberated off the valley walls as I eased out of a slumber and into my damp wading boots. After the group rose, so did the amber hue of the sun, as we again walked up the valley in search of mahseer.

After a successful morning we returned to camp for a lunch of curried mutton and masala vegetables. Baba was there. He'd walked barefoot up from the temple at the confluence to present us with a bowl of purple powder. On Holi it is tradition to celebrate by coloring one's face with such dust. He smiled as he smudged color across our foreheads.

And with that, he pressed his palms together, uttered “Namaste,” and ambled down a rocky road toward the bridge back to home.

That evening we were to leave, tackling a circuitous 12-hour, molar-jostling drive over high mountain passes rife with landslides to Delhi, where our adventure would end. So we spent that afternoon fishing downstream, toward the confluence with the Mahakali and near Baba's home. Danylchuk swiftly pulled in two plump mahseer, Panwar one. I fished

downstream from them, working rapids and eddies, slowly working my way toward the confluence on the opposite side of the Sarayu from the temple. I made my way down to the confluence, past a set of concrete stairs that pours into the river, allowing people to wade in prayer. By those stairs was a whirling eddy. Danylchuk took my place on the stairs while I angled, until out of sight, downstream, where the clear emerald water of the Sarayu melded with the Mahakali's creamy green flow.

As I cast into the seam of the river I heard a scream. “Big fish! Brian, get the camera! Big fish coming at you!”

It was Alter shouting. From behind a slight knoll of rounded rocks shot a lime green fly line, like a laser beam being fired from upstream. It was Danylchuk's line, and it rapidly ripped a gash in the water from his stance near the prayer stairs, through the quick water and into the flat-water at the confluence. He was into his backing by the time I saw the line, and was sprinting with Alter, Panwar, and two

guides down the shoreline.

Danylchuk made his way to the shore of the confluence and gingerly, but powerfully, eased the fish into the calmer water. He reeled down on the fish and eventually brought a 35-pound mahseer to his hand. With one hand cupped under the fish's draping belly and another on its tail, Danylchuk, still donning purple color on his forehead, lifted the fish for a moment while I fired some frames with the confluence and Baba's home in the background. Within a minute he released the powerful fish into the crisp water of the Mahakali River.

Before leaving, we visited Baba. We entered under threatening skies, leaving our shoes at the threshold of the temple. Baba greeted us and prayed for us, smearing holy ashes on our foreheads as a sign of compassion. As we walked through the temple, the wind kicked up and the clouds opened. Large, fat drops of rain dashed through the sky. Baba gestured to us, and we followed him into a dark, tiny, doorless single room with a small firepit in the middle. This was his room, his home.

As the rain pelted the prayer flags and the colorful ceramic tiles of the courtyard, Baba spoke about the poachers, his role in the world, and the proposed dam that

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would flood the valley. A broken clock rested in the corner. Dirty tin chai cups littered the floor. He pulled out a hand-rolled cigarette and some damp matches and lit it. Smoke cartwheeled through his thick beard, tumbling out the door and into the rainy sky. Panwar asked about the dam.

“What will you do when it's built, when your home is gone, when you have nowhere to go?”

Baba took a pull of the limp cigarette, exhaled, and spoke.

“It won't happen. I'm not worried. Because it can't happen. Shiva won't let it happen. He will protect us.”

With those words the precipitation tapered. A ray of sun sliced through the clouds, through a fading sheet of rain, and into the room, casting a beam across Baba's face. He took another drag and looked at us.

“You see? Shiva won't allow it.” —

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