International Journal of English Literature, Linguistics, and Social Sciences: A Multidisciplinary Journal
https://ijels.org/

ISSN: 3139-1745
Vol-2, Issue-4, Oct-Dec 2026
Peer-Reviewed Journal

Rhizomatic Devi: A Deleuzio-Guattarian Analysis of the Ecological and Cultural Web of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in Bill Aitken's *The Nanda Devi Affair*

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Received: 30/Sep/2026

Revised: 26/Oct/2026

Accepted: 02/Nov/2026

Published: 07/Nov/2026

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Abstract

A traveller's journey to a place necessarily brings him to interact with its culture, consciously or unconsciously that encompasses communal beliefs, rituals, traditions, food preferences, customs, clothes et al. All these elements are interconnected in a way that it creates a dense multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical network which according to Deleuze and Guattari could be called as a rhizome. Thus, to understand the culture of a community entirely, one has to study all the aspects of this network. Through his detailed analysis of the cult of the Goddess, Bill Aitken negotiates between human-nature relations, mountaineering quests and spirituality. Through thirty years of travelling experience in Kumaon and Garhwal, the author comes to develop a better understanding of identity, ecology and spirituality. It is a journey moving away from the mechanical mountaineering conquests and becoming one with nature. This paper analyses Bill Aitken's travels in the Nanda Devi sanctuary to comprehend The Nanda Devi Affair as a rhizomatic text which incorporates the religious, spiritual, mystical and commercial facets of the Nanda Devi Mountain. By using Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's concept of rhizome as developed in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980), this paper attempts to undertake Aitken's narrative as a comprehensive study of a blend of interconnected stories, cultural practices and traditions, folklore and myths surrounding the Nanda Devi Mountain. The study uses close reading through rhizomatic mapping as its core methodology to argue that Nanda Devi – as spiritual healer, mythological goddess, geological site and a living ecosystem – encompasses the six fundamental characteristics of a rhizome: network of connections, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania. The textual analysis moves along the three thematic nodes: Nanda Devi's ability to dissolve societal hierarchies through multidimensional horizontal alliances; the coexistence of multiple identities of the mountain; the continuous deterritorialization and reterritorialization of its sacred ecology and cultural connotations across generations of use. The study broadens Nanda Devi's case via a parallel reference to Aravalli Bachao Citizens Movement to propose that the rhizomatic study which Aitken tacitly expresses in his narrative offers a prototype for contemporary eco-centric policymaking.

https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.v2n4.5

Keywords: ***Rhizome, Nanda Devi, Mountaineering, Deterritorialization, Reterritorialization.***

I. INTRODUCTION

The Nanda Devi Affair (1994) is a travelogue written by the Scottish, self-proclaimed naturalised Indian author, Bill Aitken. In this text, the author examines the Nanda Devi culture through his decades long journey in and around the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. His journey does not necessarily follow an itinerary but is formed by memories and experiences glued together randomly. Thus, breaking the conventional travel writing tradition, the text emerges as a "transformative agency" that portrays the mountains as a living for which holds the capacity to reshape the minds of those who approach it (Pal, 2020). At the onset of the book, the author clearly addresses the purpose of his narrative as he claims, "This is neither a book about Himalayan climbing nor a treatise on hill theology but a diary of mountain relish" (Aitken 1994, Foreword). It clarifies his spiritual motivation behind his ascent to Nanda Devi. Born and brought up in Scotland near Dumyat, Aitken has always been on a quest to find a spiritual connection with nature in the form of mountains. In Scotland, it was Dumyat that fulfilled his quest but when he came to India for his higher studies, eventually Nanda Devi became his spiritual guide. While there were other religiously famous mountains like Bandar Poonch, Trisul and Dunagiri, it was Nanda Devi that catered to his soul. He treated the mountain as a deity, a sacred mountain etc. Thus, finding different meanings in the same being widened his worldview and through his journey, he learned to respect the multiple identities that people associate with the mountain. Aitken respected every cultural belief yet attempted to form his own beliefs during his journey.

His experiences provide a detailed background study as well as its current cultural practices. Aitken elaborates upon various religious, commercial, spiritual, social and cultural practices of various sects of people in this region such as the Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra, the annual procession of the Nanda Devi, myths revolving the Roopkund Lake skeletons, stories of mountaineering expeditions, discovery of certain trails and passes, poaching and illegal smuggling of musk deer for pod, animal sacrifices in the Nanda Devi temple, failure of the CIA mission to plant a nuclear device on the mountain, increasing deforestation and littering in the camping areas etc threatening radioactive contamination of the Ganges Basin (Aitken 70-117; Singh). Through these narratives imbibed within the text, Aitken presents a comprehensive view of the mountain to the readers for a better understanding of the Nanda Devi culture.

Once considered to be the highest mountain in India, Nanda Devi (7,816 metres) has been in scholarly discussions for a long time. Some academicians still consider the Nanda Devi mountain to be India's highest peak since Kangchenjunga is located on Indian-Nepal border while Nanda Devi is entirely located in India which attracted mountaineers from all around the world to explore Nanda Devi. Besides its geological importance, Nanda Devi holds deep spiritual significance. It is widely recognized as goddess Nanda Devi in Kumaon and Garhwal regions (Aitken; Carter). The Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve is also identified as a world heritage site by UNESCO as it embodies rich biodiversity and a hub of rare species ("Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks"). There are numerous legends, folklores and myths about the Nanda Devi that have survived for centuries among the native inhabitants. Historically, the mountain stands as a symbol for adventure and spirituality attracting various kinds of crowds – mountaineers who want to ascend to the summit; travellers who want to explore the Nanda Devi culture and those who visit the mountain to gain spirituality et al.

Having outlined the context of the book, its geographical setting and the author's purpose behind writing this book, it becomes imperative to examine how the selected text shapes the central argument of this paper. This study draws on Felix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze's theory to explore how the concept of rhizome operates within the Nanda Devi culture. While the text appears to document the author's ostensibly personal journey through the Nanda Devi sanctuary, it also presents profound philosophical insights and raises deeper concerns about environment, identity and human responsibility by reading Nanda Devi as a rhizome in a Deleuzio-Guattarian sense. By applying this theoretical

https://dx.doi.org/10.22161/ijels.v2.n4.5
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framework to Aitken's text, the study aims to not only highlight the select text's theoretical depth but also claims that the sacred ecology of the Himalayas, as Aitken portrays, continues to survive precisely because it operates through rhizomatic networking, coexisting multiple identities, and the endless process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. The contemporaneity of Aitken's text is demonstrated by citing recent environmental movements across the nation that function in a similar multidimensional, networked and decentralized activism to protect such ecologies (Seminera and Verduzco).

The theoretical foundation of this paper relies on the conceptual framework of rhizome designed by the twentieth century French philosophers and theorists, Deleuze and Guattari who distinguished it from an arborescent tree due to its characteristics like heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, decalcomania etc. The origin of the word 'rhizome' lies in Greek language where the prefix 'rhiza-' means root and suffix '-oma' means process or action (Nomad Garden). Etymologically, 'rhizome' suggests its biological function, primarily used in the field of botany to describe an altered underground stem system. When the stem attains enough nutrients and water to support itself, it expands through nodes which further develops roots and shoots in any direction, thereby forming a chaotic, multi-dimensional and interconnected network of stems that lacks a clear, well defined, traceable route ("Rhizome"). Through nodes, the stem develops additional shoots and roots which grow in their own direction. Thus, a rhizome becomes multi-dimensional and open to possibilities of entering new territories. Its relative flexibility and autonomy to grow wherever it wants implies that unlike a common root or shoot system, a rhizome is not quite bound to any specific plant or tree. A rhizome is autonomous and has the freedom to create new plants.

This post-structuralist concept of rhizome is based on its botanical nature. Here, rhizome means a multi-dimensional, non-linear and interconnected network which is open to possibilities of how different things could connect and operate in various ways. Thus, by delimiting the possibilities of how different things function among themselves, they use rhizome beyond its botanical function to suggest and explain anything. They suggest that a rhizome can be used to explain anything provided that their actions correspond to the nature of a rhizome i.e. they do not resolve into a singular direction or an easily traceable trail.

Here, they explain the concept of rhizome by taking the example of a pack of wolves as a rhizome. According to Deleuze and Guattari, a wolf is not a single entity. It lives in pack and forms a network of connections with the other wolves of the pack based on their shape, size, movement and other features. A pack of wolves is non-arborescent i.e. they cannot be reduced to one entity. In a pack of wolves, there is no fixed centre or hierarchy among its members. For instance, during a hunt, there is no fixed position or distance between wolves. Some lead the hunt by moving ahead, some attack from the sides and some stay behind. There is no fixed or organised pattern to be followed in each hunt. Every time their distance and position vary with no one being in charge of it. One might lead during the hunt; another might lead during the tracking and some other might dominate during the defence. The leadership among a pack of wolves keeps on circulating rather than being centralised at one point. In this way, different sorts of connections emerge from the roles they take up in different situations. This multiplicity, absence of hierarchy, decentralised power and meanings, and the network of connections that exists in a pack of wolves exemplifies it as an appropriate example of a rhizome (Guattari and Deleuze, 1987, 47-59).

Deleuze and Guattari have further explained the six fundamental characteristics of a rhizome. Firstly, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Guattari and Deleuze, 1987, 28) i.e. a rhizome must have the ability to form connections with other rhizomatic structures to build a network of such connections. Brent Adkins argue that assemblages – the fundamental unit of a rhizome – "always possesses tendencies toward both stasis and change as the abstract poles of a single continuum" i.e. it proves that cultural formations are often dynamic, further substantiating the core argument of this study (Adkins 13). Secondly, all the components that form a rhizome must be heterogenous, varying internally to add newness and diversity to it. Thirdly, by catering heterogenous components, a rhizome embraces multiple identities. It means that based on the available material, it can

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form anything since it wouldn't be bound to a single principle or idea. Fourthly, "A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines" (Guattari and Deleuze, 1987, 30). Mohamed Zayani calls this network system as a "hyper-dynamic system that resists closure". It suggests that any disruption or breakage in the rhizome cannot dissolve or destabilize the whole network since there is no centre of a rhizome to which all its energy is allocated. The heterogeneity of elements in a rhizome emerges from the variations that occur at the behest of its asignifying rupture. Fifthly, a rhizome forms "a map and not a tracing" (Guattari and Deleuze, 1987, 33). Its trail is only mappable. It cannot be traced i.e. we can only define the area in which the rhizome has spread but not the path or process of how it has spread. It also implies that it cannot be replicated in the same way as earlier. One cannot identify the beginning or end of a rhizome by looking at it. Within the field of ecocriticism, Serpil Opperman has directly drawn on Deleuzio-Guattarian rhizome theory to posit that ecocriticism's evolution through the third wave could be best understood as a rhizome, existing through variations and assemblages to resist a structural development (Opperman 337). This argument is further advanced by Lawrence Buell, Ursula K. Heise and Karen Thornber's study on the "imagination of place" where they argue that people form varied emotional connections with a place. These emotional connections provide the landscape with connotative meanings that humans manifest in their cultural practices, rituals and traditions. Ultimately, such connections foster care, respect and environmental ethics in them (Buell, Heise and Thornber). Lastly, properties of a rhizome are transferrable and not only limited to it, else it would mean that it is reduced to a single identity and restrict its possibilities. A rhizome contrasts with an arborescent (a tree like structure). An arborescent resolves into a single point i.e. an idea, identity, path, belief etc. For instance, a tree stands for the whole root system beneath it. It has a centre point where almost all of its energy is allocated, whereas a rhizome cannot resolve into a single point and has multiple possibilities of expansion. It possesses potential to construct its own trajectory. Noel Gough asserts that a rhizome "shakes the tree" of hierarchical segregation and renders all the elements to form connections in any direction and any manner, liberating it from fixed meanings and structures (Gough).

Based on the above-mentioned properties of a rhizome, the paper now explores up to what extent *The Nanda Devi Affair* exhibits these properties through three nodes of discussion in the rhizomatic mapping of Nanda Devi culture.

II. NETWORK OF CONNECTIONS

The first characteristic of rhizomatic mapping according to Deleuze and Guattari is the ability to form connections with any and everything an entity interacts with. Aitken's The Nanda Devi Affair can be easily read along these lines, since the author describes the mountain as not only a physical landscape. Rather, it connects the local people with their myths, folktales, rituals and the environment by dissolving all kinds of social hierarchies. The book as described in its forward is not about climbing Nanda Devi as a mountaineering conquest, nor for religious purpose. Rather, the author in the form of a traveller, visits the mountain in search of spiritual satisfaction that is beyond worldly materialistic pleasures. He tries to understand the different rituals, practices, traditions, myths and narratives that persist in and around the Nanda Devi mountain through his journey. The author connects the physical landscape, indigenous communities, their myths and spiritual practices along with his own reflective and emotional transformations. Nanda Devi landscape includes fragile hilly terrain, deep valleys, forests, rivers and glaciers which provide meaning to people, be it through spiritual exploration, reverence or domination.

In several cultures, mountains are worshipped as 'sacred' such as Mount Sinai in Egypt, Mount Fuji in Japan, Tan Shai in China, Mount Kailash in India – have "well-established networks of myths, beliefs, and religious practices such as pilgrimage, meditation, and sacrifice" (Bernbaum). Mount Nanda Devi in India is also considered as a sacred mountain, worshipped as "one of the most popular goddesses" (Sax, Mountain Goddess 3) which protects both Kumaon and Garhwal and provides people water, fodder, medicinal herbs, clean air, and shelter. Aitken's Nanda Devi resembles the above-mentioned sacred mountains in the sense that they all have the capacity to create what

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Fornssler et al explain as "relational milieu" – a rhizomatic field where "any point of a rhizome can connect with any other (Fornssler et al).

Bhaskar Sinha and Sameer Mishra's research on the Hariyali landscape in Garhwal claims that "Sacred species/groves/landscapes have played an important role in conserving biodiversity" in India (Sinha and Mishra). For instance, Bhotiya community in Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve (NBDR) considered it as "a sacred landscape". Thus, their cultural practices were so much rooted in their environment that their displacement from the region created "severe imbalances in the overall ecosystem" (Bisht and Sharma 630). However, even natural disasters are often interpreted as violation of ecological harmony or the deity's anger towards those who challenge the local traditions. For example, Nanda Devi Unsoeld, the daughter of alpinist Willy Unsoeld, died during her ascent to Mount Nanda Devi due to complications from hernia that had contracted earlier before the climb. However, the hillmen blamed Nanda Devi Unsoeld for flaunting her sexuality through the "scanty dress" she wore and her will to share a tent with her fiancé as the cause of her death during the climb "for Nanda was known to be an angry and jealous Goddess" (Aitken 18). It was for this reason that sacred mountains like the Nanda Devi's sanctuary and national park remained protected by the local communities for centuries as people feared displeasing the goddess. The local communities practised cattle grazing, hunting, food gathering in amounts that were required for basic survival needs than cluttering resources for future needs.

Over time, some cultural beliefs of the hilly communities become too conservative and rigid that they associated negative stereotypes with the Nanda Devi. On the other hand, the 'progressive' and 'intellectual' mountaineers cause enough damage to disturb human-nature harmony. After the Nanda Devi sanctuary was opened for commercial climbing in 1974, it led to mass tourism, severe environmental damage and pollution. During this period, heavy tourism caused overcrowding, lack of resources, deforestation, animal hunting, smuggling and illegal killing of musk dear for musk pod et al. Yet, Aitken claims "In accepting the crude villager and the complex mountaineer as her devotees the Goddess Nanda shows herself even-handed in her bliss-giving" (59). Aitken observes how the Nanda Devi sanctuary is traversed by mountaineers, local communities, merchant-traders and spiritual leaders – each entering the same terrain with different intentions and purposes, yet all are attracted by the same mountain (Aitken 35-62). This is exactly what Bosak has identified as Nanda Devi Biosphere Reserve's "biocultural diversity" where all the members of the ecosystem contribute towards mutual biological and cultural richness. The author suggests that goddess Nanda becomes a harmonious thread to connect various tenets that one associates with Mount Nanda Devi by dissolving various social, financial and cultural barriers and hierarchies into an inclusive and mutually enriching ecological and spiritual space. Zayani's study supports the dissolution of hierarchies in a rhizome since it is "alliance, uniquely alliance… the fabric of a rhizome is conjunction" (Zayani, citing Deleuze and Guattari *A Thousand Plateaus* 25). However, this harmonious thread is not unidirectional, but a dense network of connections where there two or more things are connected in a complex, unmappable and untraceable trajectory with various nuances and beliefs that people associate with each connection. It is not the place but the stereotypes formed by human association and spread through generations. Nature welcomes all but humans categorize and define them according to their beliefs. In ecocritical terms, the author presents Nanda Devi Mountain as an inclusive non-anthropocentric space which treats all human beings likewise – regardless of their class, caste, creed, gender or education. "The goddess soars above the differences of dress and language, custom and diet" (Aitken 38). Yet, it is human beings that stereotype nature, whether positively or negatively. Ironically, a villager is rooted in traditional cultural beliefs of human-nature harmony yet for him, goat sacrifices in Nanda Devi temple is an important ritual performed to worship the goddess. Similarly, a mountaineer endowed with modern techniques and knowledge becomes the biggest reason for disturbing human-nature harmony. Yet, both the villager and the mountaineer are treated equally by the mountain. Nanda Devi's reception of both of them without any preference suggests that environmental belonging is earned through humility and relationality than one's status. This inclusiveness instils a deeper ecological consciousness where humans realize their insignificance in front of nature. They understand

that their identities dissolve before the sacred landscape and whatever remains is their shared respect, fear and devotion towards the mountain. Therefore, Nanda Devi emerges as a symbolic site where spiritual devotion, ecological awareness and cultural myths and folklores converge. It implies that human diversity is secondary to the universal ethic of reverence and human-nature co-existence.

Nanda Devi's connective capacity expands beyond environmental, social, spiritual and psychological aspects by functioning simultaneously as a patron deity, sacred mountain, cultural and spiritual symbol to emphasize upon an entire ecology of relationships. Her mere presence transforms the local communities into pilgrim networks, cultural traditions into worshipping rituals, and natural experience into a spiritual exploration. In doing so, Nanda Devi creates a unique framework where ecology, culture and spirituality become inseparable.

III. MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Life exists within multiplicity. Everything is connected with something else in a way that it forms a dense network of connections where even a slight variation in one of the elements of the structure results in various shapes, sizes, figures, beliefs etc. "A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing, in nature the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows" (Guattari and Deleuze, 1997, 8). Similarly, multiplicity of Nanda Devi associations grows in number as the number of communities, myths, folklores, legends and discourses increase. The author has not presented the Nanda Devi Mountain as a single unified identity but as having multiple identities. Aitken's *The Nanda Devi Affair* identifies a few of the hundreds and thousands of variations in meanings associated with Mount Nanda Devi. He has not only defined it as a geological or mythological figure but also a Goddess, a geological site, UNESCO-heritage site, terrain for CIA mission failure, a spiritual teacher, an ecological site, a cultural symbol and a living ecosystem (Aitken 1–22; Carter; "Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks"). As Adkins argues, rhizomatic mapping is possible because of heterogeneity in its components within each assemblage. All the multiple identities of the mountain coexist because of this heterogeneity where the identities do not contradict one another but form "singularities" that "affect and are affected by" one another (Adkins).

Geologically, Nanda Devi Mountain is the second highest peak of India measuring 25,646 feet formed by millions of years of tectonic activity and glacial erosion in the Central Himalayas. The Nanda Devi National Park's topography includes gigantic peaks, glacial moraines and deep gorges formed by the metamorphic and sedimentary rocks. It is also home to more than 100 bird species, over 300 flowering plants and several rare and endangered Himalayan species such as the Himalayan black bear, musk deer, brown bear, snow leopard and bharal (blue sheep). For centuries, the inner sanctuary of the mountain was protected by the indigenous communities, Indian government and UNESCO. It is due to this protection of the Nanda Devi inner sanctuary that viable populations of these endangered species are somehow being maintained in their natural habitat (International Parks) despite continuous reports of illegal poaching and environmental damage activities carried secretively.

The instinct of protecting and respecting one's surroundings, whether socially or environmentally is an inbuilt reflex of many indigenous communities. Mountains often become a spiritual symbol for the local communities as well as for those whose primary aim is to reach the summit of the mountain. It is their experience and knowledge which makes them realize that the Himalayas "alter the souls of even those who do not come to them, or behold them, as seekers" (Gokhale, 2016, p. xvi) A mountain's endurance, sturdiness, verticality, resilience, calmness and patience are interpreted as lessons for humanity that contributes to build one's strong and powerful character. Nanda Devi's towering peak evokes humility in people reminding them of their insignificant stature in the larger ecosystem. The coarse terrain of the mountains conveys virtues like discipline, patience, transcendence, detachment and resilience. "Bill Aitken's pursuit from the intellectual terrain to the spiritual well-being comes after the sublime understanding when the height's physical buoyancy interacts with the human soul" (Pal 110). The "silence of the mountain" (Aitken 67) helps one to introspect

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and know themselves better, away from the noisy and chaotic everyday city life. Through the ever-changing and unpredictable weather conditions, the mountain teaches interdependence among species in an ecosystem, impermanence and the necessity of maintaining a delicate balance of human-nature relationship. Over generations, these experiential insights materialize into various forms such as folklores, myths, legends, traditions, rituals and spiritual practices, transforming the mountain into a guru-like entity. The mountain teaches through its form, challenges, and relationship with different species which thereby transforms the mountain into a sacred text composed of stone, snow and sky.

Bill Aitken observes that for the indigenous communities, "Nanda Devi is the patron Goddess of both Kumaon and Garhwal" (20). Many localites worship Nanda Devi as their supreme deity in both the regions despite their decades long cultural rivalries. Nanda Devi is popularly called as 'the bliss-giving goddess' (15), "Hindu garden of Eden" (15) as the native people respect, worship and love the deity. However, even as the 'patron deity' of Uttarakhand, there are multiple folklores, beliefs and legends in which different sects put their faith. Taking the role of a mountain mystic, the author respects the common belief that Nanda Devi is a common mediator, a binding thread and a protectress who treats Kumauni and Garhwali people likewise (Carter). It implies that worshipping Nanda Devi has eased up the century's long rivalry between the two feuding cultural provinces. Yet, the critic in him eventually realizes that "Some Almora pundits hold that the hump of the main peak proves that Nanda is a corruption of Nandi the bull, sacred vehicle of Shiva. They argue that rather than a Goddess, the mountain is the footstool of Shiva who dwells on Kailash" (21). Aitken contradicts this belief by presenting the belief of some other hillmen who claim that the vehicle of the deity cannot be higher than the deity itself (Nanda Devi Mountain is 3000 ft higher than Mount Kailash) (22).

In majority of the Kumaon and Garhwal region, Nanda Devi is considered as the manifestation of goddess Parvati as evident in the traditions and rituals of the region (Carter). The Nanda Raj Jat Yatra famously known as 'Himalayan Kumbha' begins from the Nauti village, believed to be the birthplace of the goddess, and culminates in Homkund (Sax, Royal Pilgrimage). Symbolically, the procession represents the journey of newly wed Nanda Devi to the abode of her husband, lord Shiva and then return to her maternal home in Garhwal. Whatever be the designated purpose of such festivals and rituals, one of their outcomes is the union of different sects in a society. These events often help to bring the society together. It instils harmony among the neighbours since all of them come together to participate in the festival in various roles. The Nanda Raj Jat Yatra "becomes an instrument of uniting the whole hilly society as it involves people from every walk of the society, be it women, girls, out-married daughters, men, people from Shilpkar communities who are generally considered subordinate to the Rajputs and Brahmins" (Vishavpriya 1016). Chandra Singh Negi asserts "One of the most evident ways in which villages create and affirm their unity during the pilgrimages of Nanda Devi and other deities is through the mixing and sharing the items or ingredients required for carrying out the ritual, the worship" (Negi, 24).

Another belief is that Nanda Devi is the daughter of the rulers of Chand Dynasty while some legends proclaim Nanda Devi as their 'Kuldevi' (family/ clan deity) (Pushpa 289). The Chand Dynasty ruled the Kumaon region from early eleventh century to late eighteenth century. Thus, the current descendants of the Chand Dynasty participate in the annual procession of the goddess in a huge number. The Nanda Devi Mahotsav takes place each year in Almora where the royal palace of the Chand Dynasty is situated (Saurabh, "Nanda Devi – Guardian Deity of the Himalayas | Uttarakhand").

H. Adams Carter in his paper, "The Goddess Nanda and Place Names of the Nanda Devi Region" elaborates upon the dense canopy of mythological and geological identities of the Nanda Devi varying on basis of physical and spiritual connotations of the mountain. William Sax's study also confirms that the multiplicity of formations in a rhizome is processual than static. Negi's research, primarily on the Uttarakhand mountains, have already navigated through this multiplicity of sacred mountains in view of "Traditional Resource Management Practices" that often treat mountains as sacred deity, vital resource and ecological community (Negi, "Culture and Biodiversity"). Aitken's descriptions of these varied

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identities of the Nanda Devi reveals that the mountain cannot be confined to a single meaning. Instead, each identity of the mountain interacts with the others – sometimes accepting and reinforcing certain characteristics of the other identities, sometimes deterritorializing them by challenging certain beliefs to reterritorialize the Nanda Devi into a layered and dynamic presence. Eventually, one's understanding of this plurality enriches one's knowledge and broadens their worldview by accepting that complexity is fundamental to how we interact with the world.

IV. DETERRITORIALIZATION AND RETERRITORIALIZATION

Presumably, the most practical and theoretically productive aspect of Deleuzio-Guattarian application to Aitken's text is the processual dynamics of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari have defined deterritorialization as a process where the fixed social, cultural and economic codes of a territory become dissolved or redirected towards new lines of flight i.e. the region loses some of its traditional ties due to changing lifestyle and culture. Reterritorialization is the process of reclaiming those territories by giving new configurations to those that have lost their older associated meanings over time. Deleuze and Guattari's definition of deterritorialization implies that any cultural belief, tradition or organised system cannot be assumed as given or fixed. Rather, it must be open to continuous change and transformations to create new assemblages (Clarke and Kessel) primarily via debates and discussions. Thus, deterritorialization is a process of questioning an organized milieu than aiming to provide answers. After an organised milieu has faced certain questions, it gradually undergoes the process of reterritorialization i.e. the deterritorialized territory is then subjected to restructuring by breaking certain old cultural practices and incorporating certain new ones.

For instance, climbing Mount Nanda Devi as a mountaineering sport began shortly after its first successful ascent in 1936 by Bill Tilman and Noel Odell through a joint British-American expedition. People from different parts of the world began visiting the mountain to conquer the Nanda Devi summit since for a long period of time it was considered as the highest peak of India. Further, it became popularised when IMF officers like S.S. Khera and H.C. Sarin promoted mountaineering among Indian youth for international political up-mobility. "From that moment the infant sport of Indian mountaineering became a bureaucratic tool for narcissistic administrators to play their favourites and curry the favours of politicians" (Aitken 17). Subsequently, IMF formed many mountaineering clubs and organized many expeditions for a female ascent to Nanda Devi, oxygen-less ascent et al. These efforts were only a capitalist endeavour to get India recognized internationally in the mountaineering world. In this process, IMF neglected the well-being of the mountaineers, the nature as well as the local communities. The mountaineers often struggled financially since there were less or no funding and tools for the expedition. Later, when the sanctuary was opened for western mountaineers, their ambition to achieve fame in the mountaineering world brought an environmental disaster. "Fragile juniper slopes above the tree-line were deliberately fired to provide charcoal for the porters whom foreign expedition had neglected to supply warm clothes" (Aitken 18). Eventually, when deforestation, littering, pollution, over-grazing became bigger problems, the government used tactics such as increasing the peak fees rather than combating the environmental issues. Practices like collecting charcoal and firewood by cutting trees; increasing the peak fees – are examples of how a territory is deterritorialized. The porters deterritorialized the organized milieu when they experienced lack of necessary survival aids. They questioned the team leaders, institutions and government authorities why couldn't they be provided with the minimal survival aids and when they didn't receive an appropriate solution to it, they changed the old practices in order to survive. Thus, they reterritorialized the territory by gathering firewood from cutting the juniper slopes i.e. transforming the existing territory by adding new practices and meanings. Charging higher fees to enter the Nanda Devi sanctuary arguably disturbed the everyday life of the local communities who were forced to pay money for grazing their cattle and access the forest for basic necessities.

Furthermore, the native communities are never given enough credit for the work they do to sustain environmental equilibrium. For instance, the

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Sherpa community is by far the most popular ethnic community in the Eastern Himalayas, primarily living in Nepal and India. The previous researchers have proved that the Sherpas are genetically distinct from the lowland populations since they have lived in mountainous regions for generations. Even at the baseline, their mitochondria used oxygen more efficiently, thereby producing more energy in their bodies. Yet, they are not given enough credit or opportunities in the expeditions. Aitken claims that a "sahib-sherpa harmony" (16) is rarely evident among the expedition groups as Sherpas are given the role of proletariats while the sahibs become the bourgeoise. Even when mountaineering expeditions began in the late nineteenth century to establish the country's name, the government neglected the indigenous communities who have climbed mountains for generations for their livelihood. Rather, they decided to train the people from metropolitan cities to summit the mountain, causing the government more time and money.

Afterwards, when the sanctuary was closed by IMF for primarily due to the failure of a Cold War era – CIA mission to put a nuclear-powered spying device on the Nanda Mountain, the sanctuary was deterritorialized from western conquests and ideas of heroism to more of a tourist sight-seeing and spiritual journey to the Nanda Devi. This is a destructive line of flight in Deleuzio-Guattarian sense. It does not signify the freedom to form any assemblage but rather creates a rupture that produces environmental and cultural damage. Most parts of both the Nanda Devi National Park and Valley of Flowers National Park were jointly designated as a single UNESCO world heritage site. UNESCO assured that both the parks were "unexplored until the 1930s and have not been subjected to anthropogenic pressures since 1983 with the exception of some well-regulated community-based ecotourism to small portions of the parks" (Nanda Devi and Valley of Flowers National Parks). For a long period of time, they remained protected due to their difficult terrain, harsh weather conditions and the possibility of nuclear radiations exposure. However, in July 2025, IMF president, Colonel Vijay Singh submitted a formal proposal to the state government to reopen the Nanda Devi inner sanctuary to boost up tourism (Singh). This proposal is questionable since during the CIA mission 5kg of Plutonium-238 was identified as missing on the mountain. With no reports of radioactive leaks or contamination until February 2026 despite multiple searches, it is assumed that the plutonium-powered generator is buried downhill under some glacier. This assumption undermines the 88 years life of Plutonium-238 which might come to surface due to future landslides and glacial movements. The proposal attempts to restabilize the previous assemblage in order to reclaim the mountain for ecological and cultural governance yet, the proposal carries a hazardous risk in exchange of the opportunity to earn tourism money. In this manner, over time, climbing the Nanda Devi mountain became a capitalist endeavour and a commercial sport. All these purposes behind climbing the mountain – spiritual, religious, heroic, capitalist, commercial sport et al – form a network of connections where the territory does not completely shed its old culture but rather transforms into a network where with each connection multiple meanings could be formed. Here, the territory remains the same but the ecological and spiritual significance of the sanctuary had been deterritorialized, albeit not entirely lost. The fixed coordinates of the previous structure changed to form new relations in the same spatial configuration.

Likewise, the local communities of this region have practised centuries old tradition of animal sacrifice in the Nanda Devi temple, with goats being the common offering. Animal sacrifice gradually developed into an obligatory ritual during the 12-yearly Raj Jat Yatra and the annual Nanda Devi festival. Nanda Devi Raj Jat Yatra is a holy procession led by the devotees of the Nanda Devi from Chamoli to Homkund. In certain regions, buffalos were also sacrificed in this ritual. Later, climbers began to take goats with them to carry supplies for expeditions to high altitude region. Goats were also believed to possess a natural ability to navigate the mountain terrain, picking the safest and most efficient routes. However, the Gandhian reform reterritorialized the local community beliefs by gradually substituting "the gruesome buffalo sacrifice" with a coconut offering at the Nanda Devi festival held in Almora (Aitken, 9) – a shift that Vishavpriya calls "cultural, religious and environmental evolution" (Vishavpriya). Thus, the meaning and purpose to climb the Nanda Devi mountain as well as the culture practised by the local communities of the sanctuary keep on changing,

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redirecting its old practices by carrying a part of the organised milieu along with certain changes in it.

V. CONCLUSION – CONTEMPORANEITY OF AITKEN'S EXPLORATIONS

Aitken emphasizes upon the virtues which one learns in the continuous presence of nature. Through the passage of time, these virtues become inextricable in the hill culture. The culture of the indigenous hilly communities reflects inclusivity of nature in their individual selves. Their belief systems concentrate on an ecosystem where human beings are only one part of it than the centre. The local communities of the hilly region revere the mountains and seek spirituality in nature – the hills, valleys, forests, caves. It can be easily observed through their cultural practices, traditions, lifestyle, folklore and community ethics. (Zurick, Julsun, Shreshtha, & Bajracharya, 2005). The local people worshipped nature and their rituals and traditions often regulated the cutting of trees, altering of rivers and animal hunting.

Aitken's observations of the Nanda Devi culture implies that the best way for the sanctuary to survive – spiritually, ecologically and culturally – is when it takes up the form of a rhizome i.e. when the beliefs, traditions and practices of various communities are respected without any biasness or hierarchies. When different sects of the hill communities, travellers and organisations like IMF begin respecting one another's culture, it creates a network of connections among them that ultimately strengthens harmony living and contestably promotes environmental equilibrium. A Deleuzio-Guattarian reading of Aitken's *The Nanda Devi Affair* emphasizes that it is not merely a narrative of his journey in the Nanda Devi sanctuary but also a symbiosis of his spiritual awakening and environmental ethics as directive coordinates of environmental stewardship. Further, this reading holds significant policy implications as the Nanda Devi case suggests that sustainable ecological governance of such landscapes requires profound understanding of the complex rhizomatic network of connections that exists in the local culture. As Bosak argues, such an understanding would help the "policy makers to understand that local ideas of resource management are based in ideas of a sacred landscape experienced through communal livelihood activities may serve to create conservation policies that will accommodate local people and help to preserve biodiversity" (Bosak 211).

In the present times, Aitken's concerns to inculcate eco-consciousness and spiritual ethics make the future of the world insecure. Bill Aitken's explorations remain highly relevant in the contemporary era, especially in the backdrop of rapidly increasing nature harmful activities such as deforestation, poaching, illegal smuggling of animal products, littering across the country. The motif behind his journey is not religious in a ritualistic sense but rather a spiritual one to visit the Nanda Devi with humility and respect. Nature conservation initiatives like Aravalli Bachao Citizens Movement across Rajasthan and Delhi-NCR, Great Nicobar Island Projects Protests, Save Dol Ka Badh Forest Protests in Rajasthan, Save Dehing-Patkai in Assam, Save Aarey Movement in Mumbai et al emerge from their spiritual beliefs, harmony living and reverence towards nature. Contemporarily, nature is highly disturbed by excessive interference of humans in the workings of ecosystem. The primary reasons for environmental problems in India are: (a) increasing inequality among the rich and the poor, (b) lack of civic sense and (c) neglect by the authorities. While environmental activists like Sonam Wangchuk and Peepal Baba are actively involved in reforestation and afforestation activities on a national level, building eco-consciousness among tourists as well as the native inhabitants, the government authorities participate in certain perturbing actions which could affect the whole ecosystem of the country. For instance, according to the Press Information Bureau, the recent judgement of Supreme court of India to accept the new definition of Aravalli Hills "as any landform rising 100 meters or more" ("Aravalli Hills") is indirectly deemed to allow mining and construction activities in the Aravalli range affecting multiple states including Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana and the nation's capital, Delhi. Thus, it resulted in massive protests, online petitions and social media awareness campaigns in these states. The Aravalli Mountain range is rightly characterized by the Protesters as "North West India's climate regulator, shield against desertification, critical water recharge zone, biodiversity hotspot and wildlife corridor" ("Aravalli Bachao"). Yet, this government decision to allow mining and construction projects in this region

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highly undermines its consequences. It is not only an attack on nature but it also harms the spiritual beliefs that a community holds. Thus, many people consider it their *dharma* to protect nature whenever such circumstances arise. This act of protection via protests and other means is considered by them as their spiritual and religious duty.

According to Bill Aitken, these spiritual ethics instil the core human values in people corrupted by greed and incessant desire to defeat others than coexist in harmony and peace. Living in nature makes one realise one's true potential and human insignificance. After travelling in the Nanda Devi Sanctuary for three decades Aitken concludes: "To stand before her sanctuary is to feel an ineffable presence that no ritual can contain. The silence of mountain itself speaks of holiness beyond human intervention" (67). The author has neither challenged nor fully accepted the various cultural beliefs and practices. Ergo, he participates in the rhizomatic network of connective cultural beliefs and practices by respecting them all without subscribing to the formation of various hierarchies. His travel account is a description of his quest to find his own spiritual meaning by continuous deterritorialization and reterritorialization of his beliefs on his journey to the Nanda Devi.

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