

# Shaping a Livable Present and Future: A review of youth studies in Nepal

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Several youth describe Nepal as akin to a lock, fixed and static, and youth as the key to open the nation to development and change (De Schepper and Poudel 2010: 27-28).

Studies of youth and youth culture in Nepal have mirrored the focus of more general youth studies: they have emerged as a social commentary in response to the development of a middle class and to social changes resulting from industrialisation and formal education that have created a discrete phase of life between childhood and adulthood (Wulff 1995).<sup>1</sup> The social distinction of youth is a modern concept and there are few parallels in the multiple cultural traditions found within Nepal's borders. Dor Bahadur Bista has argued that amongst ethnic communities whose economic livelihoods are agriculturally based, there is no dichotomisation between children and adults in which, under particular circumstances, one ceases to be a child in order to become an adult (1991). Rather, Bista states: 'Life is a single continuum with no apparent disjuncture between childhood, youth, and adulthood' (1991: 69). Bista, however, cites the notable exception of *vratibandha*, the sacred thread-wearing ceremony that marks male initiation into adulthood, practised amongst Parbatiya Bahuns and Chhetris, ethnic Newar Hindus, and 'twice born' Hindu castes of the Tarai. I have argued that the Hindu life cycle is one native paradigm from which to understand cultural conceptions of youth in Nepal, since the *brahmacharyasram* period for education and learning from society is central to the life stage process (2009: 48-49). It must be noted, however, that during Rana rule (1846-1951) it was mainly elite, high-caste males who had access to the education that allowed for a social experience that replicated the Hindu life cycle in its ideal form. And while high-caste

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Hindu values officially dictated citizens' roles and responsibilities during the Panchayat period (Onta-Bhatta 2001 & Tamang 2000), the life cycle experiences of most Nepali citizens were still dependent on social factors dictated by caste, ethnicity, and gender.

Other Nepal scholars have searched for social distinctions that distinguish childhood from adulthood. Lazima Onta-Bhatta has traced the socio-legal history of what has constituted childhood from the first legal code (*Muluki Ain*) of 1854 to the Children's Act of 1992 (Onta-Bhatta 2001). She notes that childhood has been extended in the legal codes over those 138 years; for example, in the original *Muluki Ain*, the minimum marriage age was set to five years for girls, but by 1976 the minimum age had been extended to sixteen years with parental permission and eighteen years without parental permission. In the 1992 Act, the age of innocence was set until ten years, while it was eight years in the 1955 act and not specified at all in the original 1854 code (ibid. 231). Onta-Bhatta argues that even though the state's ideology, policies and legal provisions were dictated by evolving Hindu values, people's social experiences of childhood were defined by work responsibilities, access to education, punishment, and marriage, all of which were negotiated by families and local communities. Onta-Bhatta's work is one of the first studies to incorporate the social and state construction of childhood into Nepal's historiography. Despite the standardisation of legal discourse, Onta-Bhatta demonstrates that multiple factors—caste, class, gender, cultural ideology, social institutions, and personal biographies—play a role in structuring the lived experience of young people.

Rachel Baker, Catherine Panter-Brick and Alison Todd's research (1996) with street children emphasises a similar point. Their position is that children are social agents who actively change their world; thus it is important to see how children engage and interact with their physical and social environment. It is for this reason that the authors argue for a mixed-methods approach to researching the lives of children, proposing the use of both biological and social methods amongst four populations of young people to create a comparative basis from which to ascertain how street children are perceived and how they perceive others. Furthermore, the authors made the children active participants in the research in order to see how they represented themselves. The authors advocate their mixed-methods and multidisciplinary approach because of the political

undertones of identifying 'children at risk' and the impending interventions (ibid. 192). For example, they argue that the consideration of earning capacity and assets as the only means to assess homeless young people's success ignores the multiple social strategies young people have for coping with the uncertainty of homeless life (Baker, Panter-Brick & Todd 1997). These coping mechanisms demonstrate that homeless peers replace the family and adults as the social network that provides economic and emotional support (ibid. 142).

Baker, Panter-Brick and Todd's research embodies the post-modern paradigm shift in scholarship focusing on young people; they approach young people's lives and behaviours as a social process, not a static position (1996). Baker expands this approach in her follow-up work with Rachel Hinton on children's right to work, focusing on child labour in Nepal's carpet factories (2001). Baker and Hinton analyse how local knowledge and cultural values impact upon the social processes that the lives of young people entail. Their intervention is meant to question the efficacy of the prescribed labour mandates of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Labor Organization Convention 182, which, the authors argue, do not take the perspectives of poor children and their families into account (ibid. 177).

Baker and Hinton distinguish between the traditional model of childhood, in which children are seen as capable household contributors, and the modern model, in which children need to be protected. They argue that in Nepal, particularly amongst the working poor, the capacity to work is not considered the domain of adulthood; instead, labour is integral to the maturation process in which young people learn from their peers and elders (ibid. 177). The polarity between the reality of people's lives (based on the traditional model of childhood) and externally enforced child labour rights mandates (based on an imported modern model) is not helpful in recognising the social and economic realities that young people in Nepal experience (ibid. 191). Furthermore, by not considering local attitudes to child labour, global interventions are not promoting laws that protect children in their working environment and provide them with proper education and training to enable them to progress beyond the work they do as children.

The focus on child soldiers during the conflict and post-conflict periods also exposes a discrepancy between the modern, formalised

descriptions of childhood upon which international mandates are based and the actual experience of childhood in Nepal (Housden 2009; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2008; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2010; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2011; Kohrt & Maharajan 2009; Kohrt, Tol, et al. 2010; Pettigrew 2007; Sharrock 2011). Like Baker and Hinton, Sharrock critiques the UNICEF-led Children Associated with Armed Forces and Groups Working Groups (CAAFAG WG) for focusing too heavily on a protectionist approach to rehabilitation at the expense of other child rights, particularly children's right to exercise their own agency and to have it supported by adults, as mandated by the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2011: 381, 400).

Many of these studies are derived from research done in cooperation with the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) whose mission is to inform national and international interventions aimed at rehabilitating child soldiers in Nepal. This scholarship reveals the stakes of policy based on legalistic and formal notions of childhood and the limited extent to which improvements can be made in the psychosocial wellbeing of young people who were traumatised by the conflict if local socio-cultural contexts are ignored (Kohrt, Tol, et al. 2010). Much of this literature considers social ecology along with the individual, communal, and macro factors that affect recruitment, war experience, and rehabilitation (Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2008; Kohrt, Tol, et al. 2010; Tol, Jordans, et al. 2009). Recognising the political, social, and economic processes that drive recruitment can help provide effective advocacy against conscription (Kohrt, Tol, et. al. 2010).

Kohrt and Koenig argue that anthropological engagement can help to identify sociopolitical push-pull factors and foster effective community responses in rehabilitating former child soldiers (2009). Predictors such as exposure to trauma (especially torture), the opportunities and freedom offered in wartime, and the way child combatants are incorporated back into their communities can also help in measuring outcomes for former child combatants (Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2010). The social ecological approach is meant to counter the blanket pathologisation of all child combatants and to emphasise psychosocial solutions for war-affected communities as a whole, which accommodate individuals based on their needs (Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2008).

Using child-led indicators in therapeutic intervention is meant to address the concerns of young people rather than impose the agenda

of adults and international conscripts (Karki, Kohrt, and Jordans 2009). This approach prioritises a culturally grounded understanding of psychosocial wellbeing and distress based on the notion of *man* (heart/mind). In many Nepali cultures, *man* is the organ of emotion and memory; it is the source of anxiety, sadness/depression, and happiness (Kohrt, Tol & Harper, 2007; Kohrt & Harper, 2008). Pettigrew argues that the long term psychosocial impacts of the 'culture of terror' on children depends on the degree to which their heart/mind (*man* in Nepali and *sai* in Gurung) is developed (2007: 340-342). Thus the TPO has developed a seven-step programme which involves heart/mind mapping to identify the main source of psycho-social distress, resource mapping to identify the socio-ecological resources in the community from which children can cultivate wellbeing, and activity listing to allow children to achieve wellbeing and identify progress toward wellbeing (Karki, Kohrt, Jordans 2009). This approach tries to balance 'expert knowledge with children's knowledge, so that children's voices do not become lost in the chorus of more traditional sources of power' (ibid: 102). As will be demonstrated, the challenge of balancing youth's knowledge in traditional power structures comes up repeatedly in studying youth in Nepal.

I provide further detail on the child-combatant literature in the third section of this paper. First I focus on the social impact of mass education on the life trajectory, and specifically on the transition from childhood to adulthood.

### **Education, modernity and aspiration**

It was the broadening of formal education and the increase in literacy during the Panchayat period (1962-90) that made the social boundary between childhood and adulthood a common experience for the general population. Since the 1960s, mass schooling has taken over more traditional forms of vocational training as the culturally legitimate and dominant form of education (Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). Skinner and Holland argue that increased education enrolments were causing more Nepali citizens to distinguish between the educated and the non-educated, a marker of status that was giving students more opportunities than their parents (1996). Formal education shaped understandings of modernity and development for an increasing number of Nepali citizens, in terms of a quest for scientific knowledge which shaped an educated

worldview that broke with a traditional past (Pigg 1996: 163 & 180). Stacy Pigg demonstrates that education was one aspect of the development regime that separated villagers from those who were connected to the outside, larger world (1992). Laura Ahearn has documented how the increased literacy rate affected people's sense of agency with regard to how and when they choose to make life decisions (2001). For example, literate women have played a more active role in determining who and when they will marry. Thus, Ahearn argues that literacy has transformed social values and practices, particularly with regard to young people's relationships with their parents (*ibid.*). Laura Kunreuther documents the role of the phone and FM radio in allowing youth to create modern relationships beyond their kin circles (2006). In his survey of internet usage amongst Kathmandu youth, Prem Kumar Luintel observes that the web expands social interactions beyond physical space into cyber space; however, it does not necessarily disconnect youths because they often browse and chat online in groups huddled around the same computer (2005).

Schooling has also affected people's sense of future opportunity (Carney and Madsen 2009; Skinner and Holland 1996), providing alternative opportunities to step outside caste-based or familial occupations (Snellinger 2010a) and hope that they can transcend their class (Liechty 1997 & 2003) or erase their caste identity markers (Valentine 2011). Schooling is central to how young people and their parents imagine new possibilities (Madsen & Carney 2011; Valentine 2011). Schooling blends everyday life experiences with promises of economic and political opportunities, making the imagining of a better life a communal process (Liechty 1997: 68). These scholars have contextualised their research in the paradigm of 'education' and 'educated persons' as culturally produced by the interplay between state education policies, international development policies, and local cultural categories (Levinson and Holland 1996: 14-5). What emerges from this analysis is that the category of 'youth' is a by-product of the socio-historical production of 'educated persons.' As a result, Nepali citizens now have a uniform experience of becoming adults through education that discretely marks off the dependency of childhood from adulthood.

Mark Liechty was the first scholar to write extensively on the social category of youth or teenager in Nepal. He contextualises the emergence

of this social category within modernity and defines modernity as a combination of 'state modernity' executed through centralised government policies promoting *vikas* (development) and 'consumer modernity'. These coalesce to promote the logic of modernity that citizens should embrace (1995: 169). Liechty has argued that education, coming out of the state modernity programme of *vikas*, has become a commodity in which people invest to raise their class standing. Thus, education becomes a part of the new lifestyle of an emerging urban middle class that links consumption and youth identity (2003). Liechty later observed that English medium private education has become part of the consumption ambitions of middle class urban Nepalis who are trying to enhance their prestige and social standing (2003). The urban youth, with whom Liechty worked, were cognisant of a larger global youth culture through media, local tourism, and the burgeoning consumption market, and Liechty argues that they framed themselves in terms of materiality (1997). The urban youth did not see themselves as teenagers simply because they embodied a particular age; rather, it was a new symbolic identity that represented a lifestyle to which they aspired; they hoped to achieve it through a particular mode of consumer behaviour (1995: 177). This teenage identity challenged the culturally sanctioned identities these young people inhabited but over which they had less control, including religious, ethnic, and geographical identities (1997). Nonetheless, '[t]he rhetoric of backwardness, development, foreign aid and education collapses time and space such that Nepali youth learn to situate themselves on the margins of a meaningful universe as consumers of an externally generated material modernity' (Liechty 1995: 187). Liechty poignantly argues that the emerging social possibilities of urban teenagers were intertwined with the awareness of Nepal's position in the global order, i.e. geographically, economically, politically and socially marginalised on the periphery.

Much of the recent literature has focused on the failure to deliver on the aspirations of opportunity through education. Shabnam Koirala-Azaad argues that this is exacerbated by the stagnant passivism that results from the rote memory learning style of education in Nepal, which continues to perpetuate caste, class, and gender inequities (2008). Valentine demonstrates that the urban poor view education as a gateway out of their current life into one that is respectable and believe that it will allow them to gain access to a world outside their own and to be embraced by it. When

a *jaqir* does not transpire, her interlocutors often blame it on not having passed the SLC. Thus both the source of and the solution to their problems is education, but more education is out of reach for many (2011). The Marxist anthropologist Stephen Mikesell provides a trenchant critique of Nepal's education system:

The rural schools in Nepal basically serve the role of disqualifying rural young people from roles in society and turning them into failures. In the School Leaving Certificate examinations of 1996, my last year of residence in Nepal, not one child from rural schools passed in the first division, which means that rural kids are eliminated from more prestigious college tracks, particularly from being engineers and doctors, the aspiration of middle class parents for their children (2006: 55).

Martha Caddell documents how private schools have also taken advantage of parents' and students' aspirations by selling them dreams that the private school sector has failed to fulfill (2006). Carney and Rappleye argue that inadequate schooling and poor labour markets have knocked down the 'developmental stairways' that originally fuelled educational aspirations and replaced them with 'exclusionary walls' (2011: 6). Madsen and Carney describe how young students simultaneously thrive for connectivity and experience exclusion, which makes their lives ambiguous and uncertain (2011). They posit that young Nepali students' experience echo Ferguson's notion of 'anti-membership' in which their 'feelings of desire and attachment, confusion and alienation and, ultimately, non-belonging, undermine the significance and progressive purpose in their life struggles (2011: 128). The social position of youth, therefore, is a deeply ambivalent one, framed by a growing gap between imagination and reality for young people who, through education, are trying to become something more than their parents are.

### **Failed aspiration: youth and conflict**

In an introduction to a *SINHAS (Studies in Nepali History and Society)* special edition on conceptions of youth in Nepal, Liechty argues that youth has historically been associated with the middle class, for which an extended gap between childhood and adulthood is first shaped by education and then

by the 'socio-economic complexity that requires a delaying of adulthood' (2009: 35). After the 1990 shift to multi-party democracy, a large section of Nepal's population has moved into the middle class. This is partly due to the broadening of formal education and the opening up of media and consumer markets, and the widening of the private sector. A middle class position has thus become a commonplace aspiration. Along with this comes a propagation of middle class values and consumer behaviours that people embrace whether they have entered the middle class or not. Nepal has fallen into the same trap experienced by other developing countries that have transitioned into industrialised, capitalist economies over the last five decades. The promise of the middle class dream earned through education was open to all, but in reality there are more applicants than there are jobs. Thus, Liechty argues, such economies suffer from a surplus of adults, who are subject to a prolonged experience of waiting, and youth becomes a holding pattern that is both a marker of class privilege and class ambition (ibid: 37). He asserts that it is the conflict between the two realities of class privilege (for those who have arrived) and class ambition (among those aspiring to social mobility) that makes youth a potential site of crisis. As a result, education inadvertently promotes an unravelling of the social order it was meant to sustain.

Liechty's observations in the *SINHAS* introduction were made with a close eye on the unfolding of events in Nepal over the last decade, during which ten of thousands of young people joined the Maoist civil war and student activists inhabited the streets for three years, first demanding the reinstatement of the democratic government and then the ousting of the monarchy in favour of a multi-party democratic republic. There is a growing literature on the negative fallout from students' failed aspirations. Education has been cited as a key factor prompting young Nepalis to react in radical ways to the gap between their aspirations and realities (Eck 2007; Pherali 2011; Shields & Rappleye 2008a & 2008b). Whelpton has noted that the expansion of education has led to an increase in the number of dissidents, especially because education has failed to lead to employment (2005). Shields and Rappleye have built on this argument and asserted that unemployment amongst the educated has been one of the Maoist's best recruitment tools (2008a and 2008b). In his memoir Gangabhadur Lama admits that he did not enter the Maoist cause due to a solid understanding of political ideology; rather that like many young urban males, he

was underemployed and bored, and thus wooed by Maoist activists who attributed his frustration to underlying political causes (Hutt 2012: 116). Pherali's research bolsters this point, arguing that in rural areas students receive more political awareness than livelihood skills, which fuels frustration and conflict worldwide (2011). He demonstrates how the ANNISU (R) (Maoist student organisation) was extremely systematic in indoctrinating rural school children to be critical of the broken promises of development and modernity (2011).

The relationship between indoctrination, education, and oppositional politics has a long history in Nepal. Many of the activists who participated in the overthrow of the Rana regime imported the political awareness they received at Patna and Benares Hindu University (Joshi and Rose 2004 [1996]). Under the 1971 National Education Plan, MA students were required to spend a year doing rural service in the 'Back to the Village National Campaign' (1971-1974). This nationwide campaign was loosely modeled on Chinese Cultural Revolution policies, aiming to bring development to villages, reconnect urban educated professionals with traditional subsistence values, and create levels of state surveillance in village life (cf. Baral 2006 [1977]; Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999); Upreti 2008). An unintended consequence of the 'village study' programme was that students affiliated with the underground political parties indoctrinated villagers throughout the country. Their indoctrination efforts played a role in preparing the citizenry for the 1980 National Referendum in which a multi-party system was narrowly defeated (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999); Snellinger 2010a). After 1990, many middle class and high caste youth invested in student politics as a career opportunity because they did not see other paths available to them (Snellinger 2010a).

The Ministry of Youth and Sports' 2008 founding agenda confirms the gap between post-education aspirations and the ability to translate them into socio-economic mobility. The MYS's mandate is to address the needs of a volatile youth demographic, which is defined as people between the ages of 16 and 40, making up 38.8% of the population (MYS 2010). With 40% of the total urban population under the age of thirty (NCP 2007) and 400,000 young people entering the labour market every year (AYON 2011), there is indeed a surplus of young adults struggling with the 'socio-economic complexity that requires a delaying of adulthood' (Liechty 2009: 35). In a comparative piece on rural youth activism in Brazil, Egypt, and Nepal,

K.B. Ghimire highlights the irony of global capitalistic attempts to court young people in order to increase consumer demand. In doing so, global capitalism has unintentionally increased the opposite: unsuccessful youth who cannot attain the lifestyle that education, media, and consumer markets have promised them (2002). The sense of worthlessness this group of people feels as a result of not conforming to the images of middle class success motivates young people to fight against global capitalism and their unfulfilled dreams (2002: 68).

For this reason it is not surprising that the main scholarly focus of youth studies in Nepal over the last decade has been on youth activism. The overarching theme of this literature is a counter to the development agencies' and general public's moral panic that the leaders of various political factions are politically manipulating vulnerable young people (Evans 2008 & 2009; De Schepper and Poudel 2010; Ghimire 2002; Hirslund 2012; Kohrt & Maharajan 2009; Sharrock 2011; Snellinger 2010a; Zharkevich 2009). Rather, these studies—which analyse the impact of empowerment programmes amongst Bhutanese youth (Evans 2008 & 2009); the psychological and social positions of child soldiers (Housden 2009; Karki, Kohrt & Jodans 2009; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2008; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2010; Kohrt, Jordans, et al. 2011; Kohrt & Maharajan 2009; Kohrt, Tol, et al. 2010; Pettigrew 2007; Sharrock 2011); the range of rural youth activism (Ghimire 2002; Ghimire 2010; Pettigrew 2007); Maoist cadres coming of age experiences (Hirslund 2012; Snellinger 2010b; Zharkevich 2009); political and nonpolitical youth perspectives on activism (De Schepper and Poudel 2010; Kohrt et al. 2008; Snellinger 2005); and student activism as a gateway into party politics (Snellinger 2010a)—contextualise what motivates the activism of young people and how young people define their social place by asserting themselves politically. These studies provide nuance by problematising youth agency.

The critical approach of many of these studies takes a cue from earlier studies of the impact of Maoist activism in the countryside. These earlier studies showed that people experienced a sense of empowerment from joining the Maoist revolutionary agenda (Pettigrew 2003; Shneiderman & Turin 2004; Sharma & Prasain 2004) and that their motivations for engaging in radical politics may even be a result of development awareness projects that were meant to empower women and children (Gautam et al. 2001; Leve 2007; Manchanda 2004; Pettigrew & Shneidermann 2004).

Rosalind Evans engages with this critical line of argumentation to demonstrate that aid agencies' programmes that were intended to empower young Bhutanese refugees to become ideal apolitical civil society members actually provided them with the tools to assert their political agency (2008). These empowerment tools were not useful to their situation, since as refugees, they were unable to work and they did not have the rights of free citizens. Thus, they utilised their new skills to improve their situation in the way that was available, by supporting the Communist Party of Bhutan's armed struggle to reinstate the refugees in Bhutan. Evans argues that neither the aid agency employees nor the refugee parents paid enough attention to what was shaping the political and moral opinions of the young refugees (2008: 60). Similarly, Zharkevich explains that being a Maoist captured the imagination of Nepali rural youth because it promised a 'genuine experience of sociality beyond the boundaries of their native places and control of the elders' (2009: 68). In his analysis of Maoist memoirs, Michael Hutt also notes that a number of authors viewed participation in the Maoist movement as an opportunity to reposition themselves from marginalised rural youth to empowered national actors who worked not only to transform their villages but the nation as a whole (2012: 121). Ghimire's (2002), Hutt's, and Zharkevich's arguments support Pettigrew's assertion that the guerilla movement offered rural youth a way to actively search for modernity (2003 & 2007), which, they emphasise, was promised to these young people through education and media but nonetheless had been inaccessible.

Zharkevich's above quote emphasises another focus of these studies of youth activism in Nepal, highlighting the moral reasons that motivate the politics of young people. Much of this work asserts that young people become politically involved out of a sense of responsibility for their community (Evans 2008 & 2009; Kohrt & Marajan 2009; Pettigrew 2007; Zharkevich 2009). Anita Ghimire notes that internally displaced youth have been an integral force in the lobbying efforts of the Maoist Victims Association (MVA). The MVA youth wing recruits war-affected youth to carry out demonstrations against the Maoists and the government. These young IDPs value the MVA for providing a social network, sense of security, purpose and home (2010: 99). In the instances when the involvement of young people is individually motivated, it is often to escape endemic caste and gender prejudice or poverty; this is particularly the

case in revolutionary activity (Kohrt & Koeing 2009; Kohrt, Tol et al. 2010; Pettigrew & Shneiderman, 2004; Sharma & Prasain, 2004).

Other scholars highlight that some are motivated by material goals and will support whichever political force is in power, and thus it cannot be assumed that all rural activism will be revolutionary (Ghimire 2002). Others problematise the false dichotomy between self-motivation and communal motivation because the politics of some young people are a mix of opportunism (politics as profession) and idealism (political ideology) that, in themselves, are not at odds with one another (Snellinger 2010a). It is for this reason that the dismissal of the statement that political leaders use youth is not so straightforward; young people are used by the leaders, but often with their consent because these individuals are consequently entering the party establishment through sister organisations of the political parties. Therefore, student politicians are used both by politics and are also seen as the political vanguard (De Schepper & Poudel 2010; Snellinger 2010a). What is noticeable in all the different factors that push young people into politics is that they all follow a 'predictable pattern based on the restriction of power and agency from the macro-social all the way down to the individual level in Nepali society' (Kohrt, Tol et al. 2010: 103).

Whichever calculus motivates the politics of young people, sacrifice is a dominant narrative in youth politics (Hirslund 2012; Snellinger 2006, 2010; Zharkevich 2009). All of these recent studies of youth activism engage with the question of how the subject positions of young people are affected by their political activities. These studies analyse youth as a social/political category by highlighting that through activism 'transformations of youth identities and reconceptualisations of politics become[s] possible' (Hirslund 2012: 1). Zharkevich's work on young Maoist soldiers (2009) and Hirslund's research on Young Communist League cadres (2012) emphasise that the experience of becoming a revolutionary shapes the coming of age of young people in very specific ways. For many marginalised individuals, participating in the Maoist People's War provided them with a sense of agency in a social process on both the macro and micro levels, which had an impact on the degree to which they suffered from postwar dysfunction (Kohrt, Tol, et al. 2010: 105).

I have argued that the *andolan* is integral to the political imaginary of party politics because the *andolan* is the traditional coming of age process

that student activists go through to become politicians. Being an *andolan-kari* is the basis for political identity in Nepali party politics (Snellinger 2010a). Hirslund, Zharkevich, and I have identified struggle (Snellinger 2006), sacrifice (Hirslund 2012; Snellinger 2010a; Zharkevich 2009), martyrdom (Snellinger 2010a & Zharkevich 2009), and heroism (Hirslund 2012 & Zharkevich 2009) as the underpinning narratives that define the commitments of young people to their activism. We also emphasise that ideology is the mechanism that especially allows Maoist youth to contend with their violent past (Snellinger 2010a & Zharkevich 2009), espouse a moral orientation that distinguishes them from other youth (Hirslund 2012 & Snellinger 2010a), and maintain organisational consistency through a disciplined lifestyle that Maoist cadres strive to embrace (Snellinger 2010a, 2010b). I have also analysed how the ideology, lifestyle, social networks and political narratives of each organisation shape the political commitments of young activists. These various components structure the organisational culture in which the student activists are embedded (Snellinger 2010a, 2010b). All these studies highlight that young people socially construct themselves through their public assertions.

Nevertheless, there is heterogeneity in the way young people choose to assert themselves and in the routes that are available to them. Many youth have become leery of party politics since 1990 multi-party democracy, dismissing it as a dirty game. This has created a gap between political and non-political youth, especially amongst the educated urban youth (Snellinger 2005). Before 2006, this pervasive attitude contributed to a distinction between the political and the civil. The only options for those who wanted to be active but were unwilling to choose a political side were civil society organisations and youth clubs (De Schepper and Poudel 2010, Sitaula 2010; Snellinger 2010a). Young people in Nepal may have had limited space to take non-partisan political stands, whereas abroad many have found the space to do so. Bandita Sijapati highlights the 'globalisation of domestic politics' that Nepali students engaged in political campaigns amongst the diaspora (2010). Since 2003, websites and blogs, such as [liberaldemocracynepal.org](http://liberaldemocracynepal.org), [sajha.com](http://sajha.com), [demrepubnepal.blogspot.com](http://demrepubnepal.blogspot.com), [samudaya.org](http://samudaya.org), as well as campaigns lobbying foreign governments, elevated the political situation of Nepal to the level of transnational debate (ibid: 148-149). Young migrants erred on the side of western liberal democratic values, which had an impact on the political discourse in Nepal. A

direct result of this has been an increase in non-partisan political youth participation in groups such as 'Nepal Unites' and 'Occupy Baluwatar', who have attempted to exert pressure to keep state reconstruction on track following the 2008 constituent assembly elections. These groups can be seen as post-political protest groups that have adopted techniques from multiple influences, including taking over the Citizens' Movement for Democracy and Peace (CMDP) regular position in front of the Prime Minister's residence in Baluwatar. They have also taken a cue from the Youth Communist League, mobilising volunteers in campaigns such as 'Clean the Bagmati 2011' in order to demonstrate that they are willing to actualise the vision of Nepal for which they are fighting. These groups also take advantage of virtual space to propagate their platform; they use Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Skype to connect with each other throughout the country and worldwide. In fact, the ubiquitous usage of these virtual spaces has all but erased the distinction between diaspora activism and local activism, causing a space-time compression in the political mobilisation of these young people. These technologies have added a more intimate dimension to the 'globalising of domestic politics' (ibid.).

Some of these recent studies critically analyse what the categories 'youth', 'childhood', and 'young people' mean, and question whether international demographic prescriptions map accurately onto local experience (Evans 2009; Ghimire 2002; Housden 2009; Kohrt & Maharajan 2009; Luger 2000; Pettigrew 2007; Sharrock 2011; Snellinger 2009). Sharrock demonstrates that the international humanitarian community used extralegal definitions of child soldier as a moral rallying cry after a number of UN failures to curb crisis throughout the globe (2011: 386). A shared conclusion is that there is no single definition for childhood, adolescence, or adulthood in Nepal, and that the existing models are flexible and contextual. Kohrt and Maharajan (2009) are concerned that development programmes that are meant to rehabilitate child soldiers may be falling short of their objectives because international development workers are oriented to the UN agreements that a child is anyone under eighteen, rather than accommodating local understandings of who their child soldiers are. Kohrt and Maharajan analyse survey responses from a range of Nepali citizens who were asked what constitutes a child and the degree to which this is dependent on age. They found that a 'person-dependent model' is the more common way for Nepalis to understand the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Basically, a person is assessed with reference to their emotional maturity, cognitive and decision-making maturity, physical maturity, and/or other forms of responsibility, rather than their age (ibid: 133). Housden furthers this argument by asserting that rural Nepali communities are confounded by CAFAAG programs directed at the reintegration of child soldiers back into their communities, since these 'children' have taken on adult responsibilities in the fields at ages as early as fifteen and are not considered child soldiers by their communities (2009: 14). Pettigrew documents how the 'culture of terror' has required some young people to fulfill adult roles because parental role models are not present, including becoming the 'man of the house' at the age of ten (2007: 335). Ghimire argues that setting voting rights at the age of eighteen means that many young people, who are considered full adults and are engaged in reciprocal labour arrangements in their communities, are left outside the formal political circuit, and thus have no choice but to assert their opinions through direct forms of activism (2002: 40). People from the countryside have articulated the same thing to me, saying that if a fifteen year old can pick up a hoe and plough the fields, he is capable of making the decision to pick up a gun or a rally torch if he chooses (field notes 2008).

Evans (2009) extends the argument critiquing childhood as a static category by demonstrating that changes in socio-political context also transform people's understandings and experiences of childhood. In her work with Bhutanese refugees she finds that being raised in a refugee camp has changed the coming of age experience within one generation. She argues that youth was not a salient category for adult refugees, because they did not differentiate that period from others in their own recollection of growing up in Bhutan (2009: 157). However, the young refugees have a different experience: in the camps they were exposed to development ideologies and education but did not have work prospects. These young people are caught between development values and the cultural values of their parents, neither of which is very relevant to their situation. They endure the clash between traditional rights and universal rights, in which their parents encourage them into marriage (the traditional route to adulthood) and the UNDP workers discourage marriage before eighteen (when they are considered 'adults'). The young refugees are indeed in a holding pattern, inhabiting the all too familiar youth subjectivity: young, educated, unemployed, and politically frustrated (ibid: 172).

I have analysed youth subjectivity—young, educated, unemployed, and politically frustrated—in a different context, demonstrating very different results. In party politics youth spans a much larger age demographic—sometimes up to sixty-five but more generally to forty—since there is little opportunity for people to advance. If you are considered junior then someone might refer to you as a ‘youth activist’ because you have not joined the echelons of party leadership; and you may find yourself claiming to be a youth activist because there is political capital in claiming to be a marginalised youth whom the political establishment should acknowledge. Thus, youth has been extended to incorporate people of additional generations into ‘micro-categories of emergence and waiting’ (2009: 62). Youth as a political category is indicative of one’s position of influence within the political landscape, which shifts within each interaction, similar to the big person/small person (*thulo manche/sano manche*) dynamic (ibid: 60). This reality was reflected in the national youth policy drawn up in 2008, which defines youth as ages 16-40. Youth leaders of the political parties were some of the most influential stakeholders in the drafting of this policy. A number of them were in their late thirties and thus still identified as youth, even though they were not considered to be youths by global standards. This situation demonstrates how the category of ‘youth’ in party politics, which is out of synch with general cultural norms, is being propagated into mainstream culture through the national youth policy. Through the enforcement of this policy over time, we may see a political conception of youth that stems from the socio-historical context of party politics becoming normalised in mainstream society.

### **Future trajectories**

The future is a central theme in youth studies. Despite a postmodern shift to focusing on the present context of young people through their ‘situatedness’, much of the youth studies data reveal that young people still struggle with a sense of incompleteness, echoing a central focus on the teleological structure of universal adolescence as a life stage (Bucholtz 2002: 528). This phenomenon can be attributed to the discrepancy between the prevalence of social institutions that give coherence to the process of life, and the lack of opportunity for young people to proceed in socially expected ways (Johnson-Hanks 2002). These socio-economic factors have led to identifying youth experience

as emerging or delayed adulthood in which preparing for the future replaces agentic action in the present (cf. Furlong ed. 2009; McLeod & Yates 2006). I have focused on the nature of the future orientation of student activists. Nepali students become involved in activism because of their struggle to shape a livable present, and therefore they postpone their aspirations and abstract them toward a future in which they might be realised, intertwining their personal aspirations with the political aspirations of the democratic movement (2010 a). This is not an experience that is unique to student activists. Like many young people in the Global South, Nepali youth generally experience the gap between their social reality and their aspirations in an anxious 'not now, not yet' state (Chakrabarty 2000: 256). Thus it is important to focus on what hopes and aspirations young people project toward the future, and how the experience of postponing and waiting affects their subjective experience of their worlds. It is also important, however, to identify future analytic trajectories in order to track the ongoing dynamic between socio-cultural reproduction and change.

A focus on youth is continuing to thrive in Nepal studies, with a number of new projects on the horizon. Himali Dixit has started research into youth clubs in Janakpur. Heather Hindman has been researching young dual national Nepalis ('Duapalis') and their attempts to influence political and civic life in Kathmandu from a supposed 'post-political' stance. Shrochis Karki has completed his research on the relationship between education, employment, and socio-economic mobility for marginalised communities. Andrea Koebel has been researching affective modes of in-betweenness of young college students at Patan campus. Nima Khanal is looking at the dichotomy of public versus private education and the involvement of youth, particularly the ANNISU-R. Casper Mayland has performed a focused ethnography of campus politics at Prithvi Narayan campus in Pokhara. Emily Medeiros is problematising the assumed pathology of child soldiers by researching how the involvement of young people in the People's War shaped their subjective worlds in Rukum. Sujit Shrestha is looking at alternative forms of the political participation of young people beyond party politics. These projects are all fascinating endeavours that will contribute to the ongoing scholarly tradition of youth studies in Nepal. Here are a few questions that I encourage us all to consider. By doing so as a collective, we will target emerging

themes of the experience of young people in Nepal and extend youth as a conceptual category across the social science disciplines.

Youth subculture has not been heavily researched since Mark Liechty took it up in the 1990s. There are many interesting case studies worth pursuing, for example: boy bands, volunteering pursuits that bolster college applications, or recreational drug use. One thing that needs to be reconsidered is whether Liechty's observations regarding urban youths' perception of themselves as being located on the global periphery still holds weight, and if so, for whom. Many young Nepalis have returned to Nepal after years of working and studying abroad. They have changed the retail landscape of Kathmandu in order to provide themselves and their peers with the amenities and lifestyles they have become used to. Their entrepreneurialism merges their life abroad with their families and traditions in Nepal, while also providing economic opportunities. As a result the cityscape is becoming more cosmopolitan. How do trends like these affect the sense of selfhood among young people, or their negotiation between family expectations, their broader aspirations, and their lifestyle? How do these trends impact on global and local flows of media, knowledge, production, and consumption? Are these entrepreneurs changing middle class values and the nature of social mobility? If so, what is their impact on more general societal values and perceptions of opportunity? Heather Hindman's work with 'Duapalis' touches on some of these questions, focusing on social entrepreneurship instead of market entrepreneurship. She is researching how the neo-liberal ethic these entrepreneurs have adopted while studying abroad is motivating their insertion into Kathmandu's civic life (2013).

There are also plenty of questions to pursue regarding migration, which is an increasingly relevant issue in Nepal. A number of scholars are exploring this topic in regard to youth studies. Anita Ghimire, for instance, notes the reluctance of internally displaced young people to return to their villages. These young people experience the pull of urban amenities, and they increase their human capital by pursuing schooling and employment opportunities not available in their villages. Thus, their long-term urban migration ultimately benefits their families too (2010). Barbara Berardi Tadié has documented the role of urban ethnic associations that transmit culture to younger generations who are not regularly exposed to the customs of village life. She says associational networks

serve as meta-spaces linking rural, urban and international levels (2010: 89). Bandita Sijapati has written on the 'transnational social field' within which young Nepali students in the U.S. participate (2010). She argues that their networks are 'fluid concentric circles' that allow them to contribute to family, community, socio-economic activity, and political structures in both the U.S. and Nepal on a daily basis (ibid: 139). These networks provide continuity between Nepal and the U.S., allowing these students to navigate the contradictions and ambiguities that marginalised life in America entails. By participating in ethnic, political, and nationalist associations, young migrants can embody the social status they held in Nepal and have it recognised; such validation is important since many of them do not have the same status in the U.S. and must struggle with low level jobs, poverty, and often illegality. This research demonstrates the usefulness of associations as analytics to track the circulation of ideas that shape the social worlds of young people. This observation echoes the importance of social networks in the way young people experience the transition to adulthood in Nepal (Baker & Hinton 2001; Sagart 1996).

The studies mentioned here have begun to scratch the surface in analysing the subjectivities of young migrants, but more is needed to get a nuanced understanding of the long-term impacts of migration. Some further questions to pursue could be: How does the migration experience shape young Nepalis? What is the impact of the subjective flow of coming and going on people's sense of opportunity, tradition, family, and social ties? How does migration affect their transition into adulthood? How does it influence their relationship to the state as citizens? Are young migrants positioning themselves in a global, knowledge-based economy rather than a national economy? To what degree is the migration experience even or uneven, depending on the nature of migration, class, caste, and ethnicity? Is migration emphasising or de-emphasising caste or class identities? How is this changing the rural and urban economic, social and political landscape in Nepal? How does the trend of rapid emigration affect young people in Nepal? And, for those who have now taken up citizenship in other countries, to what degree do they maintain links to Nepal and what are the implications of those links? What impact does their relationship to Nepal and their traditions have upon their subject position in their new nation? Bandita Sijapati has continued providing insight into these queries with her team at Centre for the Study of Labour

and Mobility in Kathmandu (<http://ceslam.org/>), which could serve as a clearinghouse for research projects on the experiences of Nepali young migrants in other countries.

The impact of youth focused policy is another field that requires more examination. Over the last decade and a half, there has been a convergence of international and national interest in a pro-active youth policies agenda. Heavy investment has gone into creating a National Youth Policy, The Ministry of Youth and Sports, and broad scale education and employment schemes in the post-conflict era. It is not surprising that youth policy has become a priority since it has been a global focus of the U.N. and other multilateral organisations since the early 1990s. What is more interesting is that youth policy is one of the rare priorities shared by all sides—the far left parties, democratic parties, royalists, the general public, and donor agencies. The majority of democratic activists and Maoist combatants were of the youth demographic. In order to keep them loyal, all the parties recognise that they must address the concerns of their young cadres. Moreover, donor agencies and the general public directly correlate investments in youth opportunity with maintaining peace and stability. Pieter De Schepper and Binoj Raj Poudel (2010) and Robin Sitaula et al. (2010) have provided overviews of these policy developments. I am currently working on a discursive analysis of the development of the National Youth Policy, which includes interviews with all participating stakeholders. Nevertheless, the impact of policy and aid agendas should be a central concern of anyone pursuing youth studies in Nepal. One of the trademarks of youth studies has been to observe the dynamic impact social, economic and political structures have on young people. This approach empirically grounds the ways in which youth studies scholars track social change and the relationship between structure and agency (Beck 1992; Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Giddens 1991). In Nepal, a focus on policy and development also unravels the relationship between the international donor regime and the state. This approach provides insights into what mediates cultural flows and social change across sovereign borders. For instance, what has been the impact of empowerment programmes in Nepal (Leve 2007)? Or what are the lasting effects of the Nepal National Youth Policy designation of the youth demographic as 16-40 rather than the international consensus of 15-24? Such questions propel ongoing analysis of the relationship

between universals and specifics, or in current parlance, the relationship between the global and the local, and the implications for Nepali youths as they navigate their life trajectories.

It is also important to consider the category of youth in post-conflict Nepal and how ongoing debates regarding federalism, secularism, affirmative action and state restructuring are unifying or dividing young people across ethnic, geographical, and gender lines. Is the national political environment causing young people to have distinctive experiences that keep them from relating to one another as a unified youth demographic? Or is the political rhetoric surrounding these debates divisive in and of itself, further entrenching social divisions despite the common experiences of young people, their anxieties and aspirations? I encourage researchers to ask whether frustration in the political landscape fuels division or encourages cooperation amongst young people, and how these dynamics contribute to understanding youth as a social and political category. Also, it is worth heeding Michael Hutt's point that little of the analysis of the motivations of young people for joining the Maoist movement rely on first-hand accounts (2012). There is indeed a dearth of textual analysis of the representations by young people of themselves, from which Nepali youth studies could benefit.

The consensus that has emerged from observing youth navigate late modernity is that 'young people do identities rather than have identities' (Miles 2000: 18). This observation mainly comes from studies in the West in which 'autobiographical thinking' (Giddens 1991:54) has become the default mode of the neoliberal individualist ethic. Studies focusing on the Global South describe a different situation, in which the biographical agency of young people is very much constrained by the structural inequalities of the global economy, despite the fact that young people aspire to the progressive life towards which their education has oriented them (cf. Jeffrey 2008; Jeffrey et al 2008; Mains 2007). There are inherent liabilities in what Ulrich Beck has termed "risk society", a result of the social asymmetry the globalised knowledge economy has produced (1992). This is starkly obvious in Nepal. Nepali youth demonstrate that risk is an uneven experience: an opportunity for some and vulnerability for others. It is important that we continue to study the extent to which young Nepalis navigate their lives between doing (consuming and producing) and being (inhabiting their position

within their kin and community networks) and what the implications are for the multiple cultures that comprise Nepali society. In this regard, youth continues to be a ripe analytic to track creative possibilities as they unfold.

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