

Working Childhoods: Youth, Agency and the Environment in India

by Jane Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014, 171 pp., ISBN 978-1-107-05838-5, price £50.

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Set in one of the remote Himalayan villages in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, *Working Childhoods* explores children's work and its role in shaping their subjectivities, sociality and gender identities. By emplacing children's work and lives in a distinct space - the Himalayan hills, forests and agricultural fields - the book demonstrates how children's selves and social relations are constituted through their engagement with a distinct natural environment. The book does more than what might be evident from its title. Apart from providing a lucid account of children's work in the Himalayan village of Benmi, *Working Childhoods* presents a textured account quite rare in contemporary anthropological writing of a rural economy based on agro-pastoralism. In approaching children's work as a 'dance and improvisations' whose rhythms are dictated by the seasonality of the local agricultural calendar and schooling, the ethnography captures the extent to which children's lifeworlds are constituted not only by schooling - a leitmotif of many recent writings on childhoods around the world - but also by work and by the distinct natural environment in which they grow up.

One of the major contributions of *Working Childhoods* to the burgeoning literature on child labour is that it provides a grounded counter-narrative to the international discourse on children's rights that approaches children as rights-bearers possessing individual agency. By demonstrating how children in Benmi constitute their agency through performing a distinct set of responsibilities in relation to their families, by fulfilling parental expectations and abiding by a set of norms, *Working Childhoods* stresses the interdependent and relational nature of children's agency. The author coins the term 'active quiescence' to refer to children's agency in Benmi (Chapter 7: 137). Extending this vein of thought, the book also draws attention to the inter-connectedness and interdependence between generations - a stance that differs considerably from much current

literature on youth in developing country contexts, which tends to focus on inter-generational conflict.

Working Childhoods is also important in documenting the contribution of children to the agrarian economy - a perspective that has been lacking not only in earlier classical anthropological writings but also in the works of feminist anthropologists who have largely ignored the centrality of children's productive and reproductive work for the household economy. However, the value of the book lies not only in its meticulous documentation of the scale of child work (accomplished through the use of time-use diaries and the author's engagement in work on par with children), but even more in demonstrating that for children, work embodies not so much an economic but rather a social and learning activity. It is through work that children in Benmi form friendships (Chapter 5), learn local social norms (Chapters 4, 5, and 6) and have fun (Chapter 4). It is due to work in the distant space of the jungle that girls escape the social constraints of the village environment and engage in joking and playful behaviour that would be considered transgressive in the village: playing and rolling in snow, the talking about such tabooed themes as romantic relationships, or simply sitting down to rest when one should be working (Chapter 5; Chapter 6: p. 122-125).

By tracing the work of children of different ages, genders, castes and classes, the book illustrates the ways in which these categories mediate childrens' experience and reproduce social hierarchies based upon them. Thus, in addition to the now commonly accepted wisdom that schooling is an important site for the reproduction of inequalities, *Working Childhoods* demonstrates that other spaces and activities - such as the allegedly neutral, 'natural' space of the forest or children's working groups - can become sites of exclusion and reproduction of social hierarchies. Suffice it to say that children from both lower and upper castes in Benmi work in strictly separate groups (Chapters 4, 5, and 6); that poorer children embark on longer and more dangerous trips for harvesting a local jungle 'cash crops' (Chapter 6); and that for the performance of a separate children's herding ritual, children distributed tasks on the basis of seniority, making the youngest children do the most difficult tasks (Chapter 4: p. 81-86).

By shifting the focus from schooling to the role of work in children's lifeworlds, *Working Childhoods* provides a powerful account of the centrality of work in children's 'social becoming'. Building on the work of

cultural historians, the book demonstrates that children's work is often inseparable from play and that it is through work-play that children learn to be members of a distinct culture and internalise dominant social norms. Rather than showing that children's work in Benmi is gendered - a fairly commonsensical point - *Working Childhoods* demonstrates how children learn gender and start performing it, reproducing the dominant ideas about femininity and masculinity already by the age of 16. Thus, while girls and boys do herding in mixed-gender groups until the age of 10-11, girls of post-pubescent age can no longer herd livestock with boys or on their own in far-away hills (Chapter 4). Instead, they have to guard their reputation, earning it through performing distinct kinds of work, such as leaf collection. A basket full of leaves might earn girls 'good reputations', therefore they are quite serious about the process of leaf collection (Chapter 5). However, for boys the collection of leaves is nowhere as important as the harvesting of the local jungle 'cash crop', lichen. By gathering a lot of lichen, boys are able to earn money and thus prove their masculinity and their ability to be future breadwinners. In short, by engaging in distinct kinds of work and doing it well, boys and girls do not only perform labour but also gender: boys earn respectability through participation in the cash economy which proves their capacity to be future breadwinners, whereas girls 'earn reputation' through unpaid work central to the household economy and for their future roles as wives (Chapter 6).

While one of the main theoretical points of the book is to demonstrate how the natural environment serves as a 'site of social activity and cultural production', it appears that our understanding of children's selves and social relations would benefit from a stronger engagement with sites of socio-cultural production other than the forest, hills or fields. *Working Childhood* stresses that children's work does not clash with their schooling. However, the paucity of information on children's schooling - even for the major protagonists of the book - does not allow the reader to fully envision the lifeworlds of children and the interrelationship between the two crucial components of children's lives (school and work). Another minor point of criticism is that the title of the book seems to encompass the focus both on childhood and youth - something that is not entirely apparent from the ethnography. While appreciating that youth and childhood in Benmi are culturally constructed and might not

conform to the international definitions of childhood and youth, most of the protagonists of the book fall into the category of children given their unmarried status, their enrolment in school and their dependence on parents. The question of definitions might have important implications for theorising agency: from being acquiescent in childhood, children's agency might acquire more oppositional elements as children turn into youths, especially should they migrate from the village and become part of a different physical (urban) and socio-cultural environment.

Working Childhoods makes a valuable contribution to the anthropology of childhood and to the international policy debates on child labour, showing the centrality of context for an accurate understanding of the nature and meaning of children's work. The book also serves as an excellent example of how a rich ethnography might help us rethink the grand theoretical debates in anthropology and broader social theory - the nature of agency and human-environment interactions being the major cases in point.