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Working Childhoods: Youth, Agency and the Environment in India

By Jane Dyson. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014. xvii + 171 pp. US$ 85.00. ISBN 978-1-107-05838-5.

Young people in South Asia, it is often argued, live in a changing world with unprecedented access to technologies and information, and they can often use their agency to challenge existing norms and live independently of their parents. In contrast, Jane Dyson presents an account of young people in the high Himalayan village of Bemni, in Uttarakhand, India, whose situation is different. A marginal economic and subsistence agricultural system, physical isolation, and ongoing inequalities of gender, caste, and class mean that young people in Bemni have neither access to technology or information nor the freedom to challenge or escape dominant structures. However, Dyson argues that this does not prevent them from having agency in the way they instill meaning into their working lives, build relationships, interact with their physical environment, improvise, and have fun.

In 2003 and 2004, Dyson and her research assistant spent 15 months living in Bemni, studying young people's working lives through accompanying them on trips into the mountains to herd cattle or gather raw materials. Her detailed and in-depth ethnographic study provides fascinating insights into the nature of their work and the meanings they instilled in it; the nature and workings of young people's agency in a context of inequality and restrictive social and economic structures; and their relationships with each other, their elders, and their environment. Dyson's close observation takes in every detail of their behavior and interactions, such as their actions, specific words they used, and the content of the songs they sang. In addition to participant observation, she gathered data from diaries kept by young people, interviews, focus groups, and a household survey. This immersive method brought Dyson very close to the subjects of her research, and she notes some of the stresses she felt in negotiating her and her research assistant's place in the community. At the same time, this closeness gave her great insight into the lives of the young people.

Dyson's central argument is that young people's work in Bemni contributed significantly to their household and village economy and that it was largely through this work that they developed their identities, exercised their agency, and could be described as active, competent "beings" in their society. Further, she argues that these young people's agency operated, not as action by the individual, but through relationships between peers and with family members. Most interestingly, Dyson introduces the idea of "active quiescence" to explain how the young people she studied used their agency to conform to social norms rather than opposing them. She argues that young people generally complied with their parents' wishes and reproduced norms of gender and caste identity not through a simple, passive uptake of ideas but by an active and conscious decision that their own best interests were aligned with their parents' wishes.

Dyson's second line of argument is around young people's relationship with their environment. She argues that this was integral to their lives, work, friendships, and identities, that "young people's working lives were thoroughly entangled in the 'stuff' of the fields and forests" (p 142). She also discusses the associations of different spaces. For girls especially, areas where they were on view were socially risky as their behavior was scrutinized, but areas far from the village provided "socially 'safe'" (p 121) spaces where they were free to find their own ways of working and build real friendships.

The book is in 7 chapters: the first 3 provide background to the ethnography, introducing the wider literature on young people's work and agency in South Asia; the social, historical, and physical contexts of the region and village; and the types of work in which young people were involved.

Through in-depth accounts of the yearly cycle of agropastoralism and the many and varied types of work in which young people in Bemni were engaged, Dyson begins to build her arguments about the physical, social, and economic structures in the village and how young people exercised agency within this context, through their work as well as in their ability to negotiate with their parents over their working practices. In Chapters 4 to 6, Dyson develops her arguments through ethnographic accounts of 3 different kinds of work carried out by young people: herding cattle, collecting leaf litter for animal bedding, and collecting lichen (*mukku)* for sale in a nearby town. These accounts detail the multiple ways that young people's agency operated within their social structures, and Dyson draws out recurring themes through her analysis, so that each chapter supports her central arguments from a different angle.

One important theme is that of improvisation: Dyson describes how young people improvised and used ingenuity and resourcefulness not only in the way they carried out their work but also in finding ways to have fun and be playful around their work. Another key theme is gender and caste inequality: Dyson's analysis of the different work practices of boys and girls from different castes shows the different levels of freedom of young people in how they carried out and found meaning in their work, and also how they used their work practices to reproduce and reinforce gender and caste identities. Friendship is also significant, being the resource through which young

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people were able to carry out their work, especially for girls collecting baskets of leaf litter, and thus exercise their agency.

In the final chapter, Dyson draws together the themes and arguments and points to the strength of young people's agency and their relationships with the environment in Bemni, as well as their important contribution to the economy. She concludes by calling for an approach to studying young people that is culturally sensitive and takes into account the physical reality of the environment as the locus of young people's working lives.

This work is particularly interesting for its focus on the experience of young people in a remote mountain community, and Dyson's conclusions are perhaps especially relevant to research in such regions. In mountainous regions, isolation and marginal agricultural systems can make young people's experiences of the world very different from those of their contemporaries in urban or lowland areas. It is also true of such areas that the physicality of the environment impinges very strongly on young people's lives and experiences. Thus there is all the greater need for research such as this, attuned to (and even immersed in) the specific cultural and environmental context of the particular community.

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