

Education and Employment: Transitional Experiences in Nepal

*Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy*

by

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between education and employment, particularly as it affects the socio-economic mobility of people from poor and marginalized communities in Nepal. I carry out a multi-sited, inter-generational analysis to investigate the aspirations, expectations, and experiences of young people. Based on ethnographic and participatory fieldwork in a village and a school in the outskirts of Lalitpur in 2012, this research grows organically to provide a detailed review of current schooling practices and their employment as well as wider implications in Nepal.

Theoretically, this thesis investigates the experiences of the marginalized in terms of the relevance, level, and quality of their education. I examine the role of education as a socializing institution as well as its characteristics as a social and a positional good. I assess the outcomes of their education through internal measures (such as exam scores and pass rates) but also extend the analysis to include external ones (such as job opportunities and life trajectories). I focus on the deterministic life-stages model of transition to challenge the expectation that children go to school, acquire skills, obtain jobs, and become ‘adults’.

People have historically placed high hopes on education, but the potential for socio-economic mobility for the poor and marginalized are limited by the failures of the school system, sustained challenges to higher education access, limited relevance of education to employment opportunities, and continued prominence of social and cultural capital to secure jobs. Yet, their educational engagement has provided some benefits even as their expectations for gainful employment have not been met. Schooling has become an integral part of childhood, but foreign migration is emerging as a prominent alternative avenue for the aspirant youth. Further, the distinctions between children and adults are also blurred as students balance their transitions between school, work, and home to succeed within the system.

To
My Father, Ganesh Man Singh Karki &
My Mother, Kalpana Karki

Thank you, for everything.

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Apparently it takes a village to raise a child: it certainly took a real and a metaphorical village for me to write this thesis. Through exhausting nights of crossing the i's and dotting the t's, the thought of finally getting to write this section has kept me going. This vote of thanks must not be considered exhaustive, and I offer my apologies in advance to those I miss here. All the shortcomings in this thesis are entirely mine.

I must begin by thanking Bhumi students and teachers as well as Dadagaun villagers, without whom this thesis would have no life. They accepted a relative stranger into their lives and went above and beyond to ensure my well-being. At Bhumi, the teachers humbled me every day not only because of the support they extended to me but especially because of their dedication to the students and the school. The countless hours I spent with each one of them-- whether in the teacher's room or the tea stall or their homes-- have shaped not only this thesis but also its author.

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Glossary

afno maanche	one's own people
andhabiswas	superstition or blind faith
bahini; didi	younger sister; older sister
bhai; dai	younger brother; older brother
bhauju	older sister-in-law
chautari	a public gathering place under a large tree
dekchi	big cooking pot
deusi bhailo	a song-dance programme performed during a religious festival
fush ko ghar	straw hut
goru becheko sahino	a weak relationship between people
guthi	community-based trusts
hisaab	calculation
jaand	alcohol
Jana Andolan	People's movement
janajatis	indigenous groups
jat	caste/ tribal or ethnic group
karyakarta	political party cadre
khaire	foreigner
khatarnaak	dangerous
kuto kodalo	trowel and hoe
loadshedding	power cuts
Lok Sewa	Civil Service
lyapche	inked fingerprints
mela	labour-share arrangement based on reciprocity
peon	office helper
ropani	a measure of land equal to about 510 square meters
sahu	an outsider who has usually bought land in the village
varnas	estates or scripturally sanctioned status groups of Hinduism

List of Abbreviations

BBS	Bachelor's in Business Studies
CCSP	Community School Support Project
CPN	Communist Party of Nepal
CWC	Central Working Committee
DEO	District Education Office
ECD	Early Childhood Development
EFA	Education for All
HSEB	Higher Secondary Education Board
JRCCC	Junior Red Cross Circle Club
MC	Master of Ceremony
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MTA	Maoist Teacher's Association
NC	Nepali Congress
NEFEN	Nepal Federation of Nationalities
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NESP	National Education System Plan
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OLPC	One Laptop Per Child
PD	Positive Deviance
PTA	Parents-Teachers Association
SEIN	Shanti Education Initiative Nepal (SEIN)
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
SMC	School Management Committee
TPO	Transcultural Psychosocial Organization
UCPN	Unified Communist Party of Nepal
UML	United Marxist Leninist
VDC	Village Development Committee

A Note on the Text

All Nepali words were transcribed following the pronunciation of these words by my respondents, so the thesis does not apply the conventional rules of transcribing Nepali into English. A number of people often used English words and phrases as part of their conversational Nepali. I have used the Batang font to mark these English words and phrases in this thesis. The glossary lists the Nepali words used frequently at the start of the thesis.

All names of people and places have been changed to ensure the anonymity of locations and research participants.

All pictures in this thesis were taken by the author. All tables and graphs used in the thesis were also computed by the author, unless otherwise stated.

I have presented the findings of the thesis in the ethnographic present to illustrate the circumstances as they evolved over the course of the research.

I note the date of the interview when I cite a respondent's interview for the first time. All the interviews quoted in this thesis were conducted between January and December 2012, unless otherwise stated.

1. Education and Employment: Transitional Experiences in Nepal

I. Introduction

Ramrari padhyo bhane thulo manche bhaincha.

(You will become a 'big' person if you study well).

- Countless elders to countless students in Nepal

Education has increasingly become central to development discourse. It is thought to contribute directly towards greater freedoms that define development (Drèze and Sen 2002, Sen 1999); to benefit society at large and influence major life decisions (Levine et al. 2001); and to facilitate upward social mobility (PROBE 1999, Vlassoff 1996, Drèze and Saran 1995). International organizations, led by the United Nations (UN), put education at the centre of their development efforts (UN Millennium Declaration 2000, UNICEF 1998, WCEFA 1990, UNESCO 1951). At the international level, initiatives such as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) goals underpin the emphasis placed on primary education. In Nepal, the centrality of education as a tool for development is reflected by official data on financial aid: the official development assistance (ODA) for education has increased from 10% in 2000-01 to 24% of total ODA in 2008-09 (Kantipur 2011a). It is not just the donors who focus on the education sector. Whether restricted to the role of preventing the formation of a revolutionary, conscious citizenry (Sharma 1990, Rana 1967), or expanded to that of 'developing the nation' (Skinner and Holland 1996, Ragsdale 1989), education has been considered central to Nepal's future by various governments for over a century. The continued emphasis on education is represented in the national budget, with the education sector allocated around 15% of the total budget over the last decade (MoF 2014). Even at the local level, as this thesis argues, people continue to equate education with progress and development, and pursue it with zeal and enthusiasm.

This conception of education, however, is contested. While education has the potential to transform lives, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts mediate people's access to education, its quality, and the opportunities it can provide (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Bourdieu 1986, 1984). For example, education can perpetuate and exaggerate inequalities by reproducing existing differences in society (Rowe et al. 2005, Katz 2004). It is often assumed education facilitates meritocratic upward mobility. However, schools are not neutral venues, but perpetuate and reproduce social inequalities even when they allow for

limited upward mobility (Levinson et al. 1996, Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). As the pursuit of education gathers momentum to reach universal proportions, the outcomes of education come under greater scrutiny. People from poor and marginalized communities often pursue education opportunities at great costs because they expect to be gainfully employed after they graduate. However, the transition from schooling to employment is not straightforward; young people throughout the world are finding that their credentials do not always lead to meaningful employment outcomes (Froerer 2011, Jeffrey 2010, Katz 2004). The widening gulf in the nature and quality of education as well as the lack of meaningful social networks for the poor and the marginalized constantly restrict their outcomes (Jeffrey et al. 2008, Appadurai 2004, Bourdieu 1986). As people get frustrated with the lack of socio-economic mobility despite their pursuit of education, their expectations and strategies concerning education can adapt and change (Froerer 2012, 2011). Many of them pursue alternative strategies, as they use their life experiences to imagine new trajectories for success (ibid., Valentin 2011).

The debate on the role of education as it affects employment opportunities for poor and marginalized communities, which will be a key issue of concern in this thesis, feeds directly into the debate on the life-stages model of transition. The life-stages model assumes that everyone goes through different stages of life in a linear, unidirectional manner (Lloyd 2005, Read 1968, Mead 1936). However, institutions such as schools often create an aura of rigidity through determined stages, even though closer analysis demonstrates that people and their roles are more fluid, regardless of these institutions (Morrow 2012, Johnson-Hanks 2002). The life-stages model culminates with the expectation that people achieve ‘adulthood’, often typified by gainful employment and family life, but people from poor and marginalized communities might not reach such a stage in the same way. The complexity of people’s life trajectories cannot thus be reduced into linear stages but have to be understood within the contexts in which they exist.

This research addresses these important debates on the role and relevance of education, including its relationship in facilitating gainful employment, by focusing on Dadagaun, a semi-peripheral village in the outskirts of Kathmandu valley, and Bhumi, a public community school. The analysis feeds further into the debate on life trajectories by highlighting the complex pathways that determine both opportunities and constraints that affect outcomes. This research thus contributes to theoretical debates concerning education, employment, and transition to employment. The scope of analysis focuses at different

levels—aspirations, experiences, and outcomes— over the course of the thesis to highlight the issues under investigation. The thesis situates the experiences of the marginalized, described in greater detail in the next chapter, in terms of the relevance, level, and quality of education. First, the study focuses on people’s expectations and aspirations from education in Dadagaun. Second, the analysis of the performance of a public community school helps assess how some schools can succeed despite facing similar constraints to other public community schools serving poor communities. Third, the scope of the investigation expands to contextualize school outcomes within the political economy of the village and the region. The assessment of educational outcomes remains traditionally tied to internal measures of success, such as enrolment rates, retention rates, test scores and exam results, but this analysis departs from such an approach to focus also on employment outcomes, which remain the predominant concern for people trapped in poverty. I investigate here the benefits of the experience of formal schooling for the poor, but extend the analysis to explore how these experiences affect their expectations of employment. Fourth, I examine the popular position that people’s life trajectories are linear and unidirectional: I assess whether specific outcomes are predetermined or based on various opportunities and constraints to negotiate different transitions in their lives. This complex understanding of life trajectories ties together the findings of this thesis, which point in contradictory directions, depending on the level and scope of analysis.

The findings that help mediate these debates arose from my attempts to answer three research questions:

1. What do people of Dadagaun think about education and what is their level of education?
2. What is the quality of the education available to Bhumi students and Dadagaun residents?
3. How does the pursuit of education affect employment outcomes and life trajectories for Dadagaun residents?

The first question involved addressing what people thought of education, its perceived importance, and its value in their daily lives. The second question helped analyze the nature and quality of schooling to map out how the current reality of education corresponds to people’s expectations from education, which are often based on past outcomes. Together, these questions helped understand education dynamics in the village and the local school, and allowed for the analysis of the success of a public community school. The third question

extended this analysis to incorporate people's aspirations and expectations beyond secondary schooling to higher education and employment. In particular, I examined how employment outcomes are shaped by schooling, the labour market, and the social status and networks of Dadagaun residents. I was able to chart people's life trajectories in relation to (or in the absence of) schooling opportunities, and how these outcomes further informed people's expectations, aspirations, and experiences for education and socio-economic mobility.

II. Structure of the Thesis

The analysis in this thesis rests on three central themes: aspirations, experiences, and outcomes. The relationship between these themes is not linear but symbiotic, as each shapes the others in turn, so I present below the chapter outline, but this should not be taken to suggest a linear, unidirectional connection.

Chapter two lays out the theoretical framework. After defining some key concepts, I examine education's role as a socializing institution as well as a positional good for people from poor and marginalized communities. I analyze the relevance of this education to the wider political economy, in addition to the level and kind of education available to those at the margins. I also scrutinize the life-stages model of transition in this chapter.

Chapter three presents a brief overview of the socio-cultural context of Nepal and highlights the history of education reform in the country. After establishing the hierarchical nature of Nepali society, I examine the strategic use of education by the elite as a tool for differentiation to consolidate their position. The findings from education research in past decades demonstrate both the opportunities and constraints faced by poor people in their quest for formal schooling.

Chapter four describes the methodology I used to carry out this research. The findings of the thesis are based on ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, learning by teaching, community survey, and virtual research. The core of the fieldwork was conducted in 2012, but my continued relationship with students, parents, teachers, and other community members further inform this thesis. I introduce here the village and school contexts within which I conducted my research, discuss the particular challenges I faced during my fieldwork, and highlight how these challenges both shape and affect my data and my findings. After commenting on the difficulty of balancing research with activism, I reflect on some of the major limitations of this research, sketching out the scope for future work to test and expand these findings.

The next five chapters present the research findings. Chapter five analyses the educational background of the older cohort and the dominant narratives around their experiences with and expectations from the school system. I examine the current engagement of school-age children in formal schooling to demonstrate the value students and parents place on education. This chapter employs an inter-generational approach to build a case for why people have historically placed high expectations on education, and expresses the value of education as a positional good. The interplay between home, school, and work for children provides a critique of a linear model of transition from childhood to adulthood, demonstrating instead the complexity of the constant horizontal and vertical transitions that structure people's opportunities and outcomes.

Chapter six and seven, together, demonstrate the experience of education. Chapter six analyzes the education experience for Dadagaun residents by focusing on Bhumi School, a public community school in the region.¹ I use the framework of positive deviance to investigate how a combination of established pedagogical practices and deviant behaviour facilitate the manipulation of an otherwise defunct system, together, to affect school outcomes for Bhumi students. I draw on the findings from this chapter to show how empowered agents manipulate constrained structures for better school results.

Chapter seven follows Bhumi graduates in their pursuit of higher education and finds that they face serious problems with effective access as well as meaningful experience in higher education. I evaluate here the role of social and cultural capital in determining school outcomes. Taken together, these two chapters contextualize the notion of success and failure, particularly measured through examinations, to argue that being successful within the system does not mean that the system itself is successful. Public school graduates face significant challenges in their pursuit of higher education.

Chapter eight extends the inter-generational analysis to look at the employment situation in Dadagaun. I trace the hopes of recent graduates as well as the lived experiences of young residents. I focus here on their political-economic realities to assess the context within which schooling and employment outcomes are determined. I evaluate how these outcomes are gendered and analyze the recent trend of out-migration in this chapter.

¹ Government schools, contrary to English usage, are usually referred to as public schools in Nepal. However, the word 'public' is included in the title of some private colleges.

Chapter nine moves away partially from the frustration and disappointment by focusing on some of the key benefits of education, including literacy, age of marriage, and new forms of social and cultural capital for people from poor and marginalized communities. I present here a composite overview of my findings by focusing on a particular family whose trajectory demonstrates the set of opportunities and constraints in relation to their aspirations and outcomes from education and employment.

I conclude by tying together the themes that have emerged over the course of this research project. In particular, I explain the role and relevance of education for people from poor and marginalized communities in Nepal, especially as it affects their socio-economic mobility.

2. Theoretical Framework

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I analyze the role and relevance of education, understood here as formal schooling, in the context of the rise of mass schooling in primary education in the developing world. The empirical evidence presented in this thesis examines whether education is the 'great leveller' of class and social differences, or whether it reproduces and reinforces the existing social hierarchy, even as it makes a marginal difference to people's lives. The expectation that education can lead people out of their poverty has become embedded in public consciousness but educational outcomes are mediated by specific historical, social, cultural, political, and economic contexts.

I contend that education is not only a social good but also a positional good, and that the returns to one's education are determined by the education levels of others and by the absorptive capacity of the labour market.² I posit that socio-cultural and political-economic realities, rather than academic credentials or skills and knowledge, primarily determine job opportunities and life trajectories, thus problematizing not just the nature but also the relevance of the education opportunities available to the poor. The quantity and quality of formal schooling available to those at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder continue to relegate them to the bottom. To the extent that quality has become a concern within the education literature, a vague notion of quality that can be easily measured has been co-opted entirely without meaningful engagement with the wider political-economic structures within which education systems function. Theoretically, this thesis locates itself in critical analysis of education that examines the ways in which education plays a role in reinforcing rather than challenging or reducing social hierarchy. Students whose social backgrounds do not have a close connection with the dominant socio-cultural and political capital and/or are unable to access these forms of capital through education institutions are thus at a decided disadvantage (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

The contradiction between the perceived role of education and its outcomes can be explosive, particularly given the high direct, indirect, and opportunity costs associated with the pursuit of education. I take an integrated approach to account for education aspirations, people's experiences with the education system, and their expected, intended, and unintended

² I explore this notion of education as a positional good theoretically in the next section and empirically in chapters five to nine.

outcomes that shape, define, and illustrate education's role as a social and a positional good in particular embedded contexts. This approach allows us to understand why people continue to place high hopes on education even when the returns to their education, which is expensive, are not as expected. I examine education's role in facilitating youth transitions, particularly as they relate to the unique opportunities and constraints young people face in their pursuit of higher education and employment.

a. Key Concepts

For the purposes of this thesis, I take education to mean formal schooling, and use the phrases interchangeably. This approach can appear reductive to some, and rightly so. Formal schooling is only one, albeit important, part of education.³ Apprenticeship, formal and informal training, and informal learning in social and cultural contexts outside schools also contribute towards a more comprehensive understanding of education. My decision to focus on formal schooling was not for methodological ease (because it can be easier to theorize and measure the role of education within established institutional settings such as schools) but to reflect grassroots perceptions of education. The reach of mass schooling in rural areas in the developing world is relatively new, and for many parents who are illiterate, sending their children to school amounts to educating them. This understanding is consistent with seeing development as a tangible thing, like a school (Pigg 1992). I am mindful of the risks of simply accepting local understandings uncritically, but I focus on formal schooling as education as my starting point in order to capture and reflect the local understanding of the concept, and the aspirations that were and are built into that understanding.

My treatment of the role and relevance of education in developing countries concerns, in particular, people from so-called marginalized communities in Nepal. This notion of marginality is not absolute but contextually dependent. In Nepal, it is considered synonymous to 'the disadvantaged', and so should broadly be understood similarly here. In this thesis, I rely on three key characteristics, which are often inter-related but can also be independent, to define marginality in Nepal. The first key characteristic of this group is poverty. While the level, extent, and diversity of their poverty varies, people from marginal communities are often very poor in both absolute and relative terms, earning less than the international standard of \$1-\$2 a day. The unique struggles of the poor in making ends meet place an

³ See, for instance, Dore 1976, Ragsdale 1989, Levinson and Holland 1996, Prakash and Esteva 1998, Katz 2004, Rothchild 2006, Jeffrey *et al.* 2008, Jeffrey 2010, and Höchner 2010 (and their bibliographies) for more detailed discussions of how education means much more than just schooling and why the two are not always synonymous.

undue burden on them that affects their opportunities and all other aspects of life. Extending the analysis of poverty further, I also focus on class, which assigns people to social categories that can prevent them from obtaining good jobs.⁴ The second characteristic of this marginalization involves caste. In a society structured hierarchically, caste identity can play a key role in defining the opportunities available to people, and the codified caste system has deeply entrenched alleged differences over time (Höfer 1979, Bista 1991). As a result, many high-caste people have been able to consolidate their position socially, economically, and politically over generations, whereas low-caste people continue to face systemic discrimination and challenges to upward mobility. A complex intertwining of caste and class (Shields and Rappleye 2008) has intensified the constraints poor, low-caste people face in their everyday lives, including in their pursuit of education (Valentin 2011, Graner 2006).⁵ The third characteristic of marginalization concerns space, but it is not limited to geography. The reach of the state, which is often concentrated in urban spaces, diminishes significantly in rural areas, so there are very few opportunities available to rural dwellers. I use the term “semi-peripheral” village to refer to my field site because despite the village’s proximity to the capital city, the village remains largely inaccessible, without even proper roads to connect it to the nearest city. Stacy Pigg (1992) has convincingly argued that village life tends to be defined by lack of development (*bikas*), with development itself being understood by people as having facilities, habits and/or understandings that cities have but villages don’t have. The very understanding of rural life is in juxtaposition to the idea of modernity, which Pigg uses as characterizing social transformation or empowerment. The notion of modernity can be “notoriously vague, analytically slippery and susceptible to multiple and sometimes contradictory sorts of invocation” (Ferguson 1999: 17), but there is no denying that the portrayal of the village is in contrast to the expectation of modernity while being consistent with the desire to seek its ultimate transformation.⁶

⁴ In their technical report on leasehold forestry in Nepal, Regmi et al. (2008: 4) equate the marginalized to the poorest. Similarly, Gurung (2009) notes class as one of the key characteristics of the marginalized in Nepal. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) also explicitly identifies “those who belong to a class which is economically, socially or culturally backward” (along with Dalits and indigenous groups, among others) as deserving of special protections and privileges from the state.

⁵ I will discuss the caste structure in Nepal in the next chapter, but this conceptualization here is not to suggest that each caste group is homogeneous either. In fact, there are hierarchies and sub-divisions within most caste groups, which is why the inter-sectionality between caste and class becomes even more relevant.

⁶ See Miller 1994, Ferguson 1999, Arce and Long 2000, and Escobar 2011 for a more comprehensive, critical discussion on how the notion of modernity and trajectories of modernity, understood primarily as signs of transformative progress, influence debates on development.

Taken together, then, the notion of marginality is also concerned with power relations, and those who do not have access to power (be it because of poverty, caste, class, geography, or something else) have very little control over their futures. I do not intend to overlay this notion of an entirely disempowered community comprising of poor, low-caste, rural dwellers, but this thesis is concerned primarily with the choices and constraints faced by people who consider themselves to be at the margins because of their caste, class, and/or geography. To be sure, there are subtleties concerning hierarchies embodied even within these categories. These sub-hierarchies become apparent through a nuanced reading of the empirical chapters in this thesis, because further categorizations such as caste (and in particular untouchability) and gender demonstrate the possibility for significant differentiation even among people from marginalized communities (see also Gellner 2007). My respondents, as I describe in subsequent chapters, were not necessarily the poorest of the poor, from the lowest caste, or in the most remote part of the country, but their lack of access to power is obvious throughout this thesis. Their situation thus raises further questions about the fate of those who are even more marginalized than them. The different subtle and not-so-subtle hierarchies within the marginalized manifest themselves in the form of a local elite, who wield greater authority within the village but nonetheless remain removed from decision-making processes in the cities that affect their villages. However, this locally acknowledged collective understanding of marginality is only meant to serve as a starting point for the analysis that follows. While the specific characteristics of the composition of the marginalized might vary, the challenges that people in the margins face remain comparable across the spectrum.

Having established some parameters for this thesis, the rest of the chapter will be divided into three main sections. I explore the role of education as a socializing institution, with particular emphasis on the experience of people from poor and marginalized communities (section two). I then examine education's role as a positional good, analyzing the relevance of education alongside the level and kind of education available to them (section three). I also discuss what constitutes education quality in this section. Next, I investigate the debate on the life-stages model of transition to understand people's life trajectories as they experience schooling and aspire to continue to higher education and gainful employment (section four). The analysis in this chapter contextualizes education aspirations, experiences, and outcomes within the socio-cultural and political-economic contexts within which they exist.

II. Education as a socializing institution

I argue in this section that the nature of the education available to marginalized communities limits their relative opportunities and is a key factor relegating them to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

A key obstacle most people from marginalized communities face is access to education. One of the most immediate shortcomings they face is financial, as people cannot afford the direct, indirect, and opportunity costs of schooling (Boyden 2013). Although recent trends in public education have moved towards generally free schooling, a lot of schools still charge various fees (such as exam and library fees) to attend these schools. Direct costs include stationery, uniform, and snacks; indirect costs refer to transport and other forms of expenditure; and opportunity costs refer to the other home and work activities students could pursue if they were not in school.

The lack of financial resources affects not just the level but also the quality of education available to children from marginalized communities. I conceptualize education quality in the next section, but irrespective of how one determines what constitutes quality, there can be no doubt that the performance of public school graduates across almost all measures of success (retention rate, graduation rate, extra-curricular performance, additional skills and knowledge, employment outcomes, and life trajectories) strongly demonstrates they are unable to perform at the same level as their private-school counterparts, who benefit from the extra support and attention they receive from their parents and guardians. (In Nepal, see for instance Graner 2006 and Bhatta 2005, 2004.) As I argue in this thesis, internal measures of success (such as pass rates) as well as more dynamic measures (such as transition to higher education and gainful employment) show unequivocally that public-school graduates trail behind significantly. Public schools lack critical human and material resources; there is a severe shortfall of effective accountability and transparency measures; most parents and community members are not engaged with the school system; the curriculum does not resonate with the lives of the children; the focus of education remains firmly within the confines of textbook teaching; and most children have to balance school expectations with rigorous work requirements (both paid and unpaid) in and around their homes, both in Nepal (Caddell 2006; Ragsdale 1989) and in India (Desai et al. (IDHS) 2010 PROBE 1999). As a result, the quality of education in public schools and the subsequent performance of public-school graduates within the education system remain inadequate. This failure to succeed at

each level directly feeds into the potential to move forward to the next level, affecting not just education outcomes but also further education opportunities.

Sugata Mishra (2013) has articulated a key question that emerges out of this education experience of curtailed outcomes. In a famous TedTalk on his ‘Hole in the Wall’ project, he wonders why all his rich friends seem to have extremely talented children while his poor friends never brag about the success of their children. Is wealth at the centre of education outcomes? There are different theoretical approaches that have tried to address this question by focusing on the wider political economy within which education systems are situated. I explore two of these approaches as they are particularly relevant to my treatment of education. I rely on Pierre Bourdieu’s and Jason Hart’s work in this section to build my argument in this thesis.

Bourdieu has been instrumental in our understanding of mediated access and outcomes to schooling (1986, 1984, 1977). He believed that different types of capital represented the set of resources that determined success, and argued that the notion of equality of opportunity mediated only by natural ability and chance is false and ahistorical (1986: 46). Given the supremacy of capital in determining outcomes, it can be considered synonymous to power, and it can present itself in three key forms. Economic capital is easily identifiable and most readily acknowledged because it is easily convertible to money and can be accumulated and transferred through property rights and inheritance laws. However, economic capital can be used to acquire and consolidate cultural capital and social capital, which in turn can be institutionalized and converted into economic capital. Cultural capital refers to a kind of symbolic credit that one can gain by learning to behave in a particular way that would reflect social standing. Social capital is the aggregate of the resources available through one’s networks and relationships, and it is determined by the size of the network one can mobilize as well as the capital available to those in that network (Bourdieu 1986: 51). As I argue in this thesis, those starting from what I have called a ‘marginalized’ position have few resources in terms of any of the three types of capital. They are able to mobilize some economic capital, but, in the absence of sufficient social or cultural capital, it turns out that they are not able to parlay educational qualifications into advantageous employment opportunities.

The actions of people with higher social standing automatically achieve greater currency and legitimacy because of the symbolic credit they possess through their cultural

capital, whereas those of lower standing receive no such legitimacy. The highly skewed valuation of cultural styles and competencies reinforce an unequal social order, as I argue in the next chapter. Schools allegedly allow elite groups to maintain power by only recognizing as intelligent their cultural capital, that is, their tastes for certain cultural products, their manner of development, speech, style of dress, and consumption patterns. Even non-elite persons can become conscious of their ‘social limits’ based on the symbolic position that might be embodied in the identity of the ‘educated person’. As these limits become permanently inscribed in a person’s way of thinking, he or she learns to self-censor and self-silence in the company of those with greater social standing. The divide between the elite and the non-elite persists rather than being overcome, as the educated person is culturally produced, reproduced, and internalized through schooling.

Bourdieu first explored this concept to examine the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from different social classes by relating academic success to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. Cultural capital exists in three forms: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized state (Bourdieu 1986). In the embodied state, cultural capital requires a process of incorporation of values and ideas through investment of time and resources. This embodied state has to be reached through personal experience to turn external wealth “into an integral part of the person” (ibid.: 48). The acquisition and transfer of cultural capital is thus not instantaneous like economic capital, so time becomes a key commodity in acquiring this form of capital. This time required to inculcate cultural capital has to be free from economic necessity, thereby making it more difficult for poor people to be able to make such an investment. In the context of schooling, the time spent towards doing homework, learning a language, or preparing for exams can be considered the investment required for success, but the constraints involve the need to carry out household work as well as seek employment to make ends meet. Cultural capital in the objectified state uses embodiment to give a tangible sense of value to capital.

The objectification of cultural capital in the form of academic qualifications is one way of neutralizing some of the properties it derives from the fact that, being embodied, it has the same biological limits as its bearer. (ibid.: 50)

The expenditure of time and resources allows people to receive academic qualification, which serves as a certification of cultural competence that guarantees a sense of value and respect that is recognized in addition to the skills and knowledge that a person

might have acquired by undergoing the process of qualification. This process also institutionalizes different forms of differentiation, as it rigidifies seemingly small differences in acquired cultural capital in the embodied state by conferring a degree to the last successful student. Even if the first unsuccessful student had learned only slightly less than the last successful one (embodied capital), the difference in their objectified capital (qualification) is institutionalized by the degrees they receive. This institutionalization makes it easier for cultural capital to be transformed into economic capital, as academic qualification makes it easier to compare (and differentiate) qualification holders and assign monetary value to work based on earned qualifications.

The problems of transition for public school graduates are accentuated by their lack of social capital. The benefits that people derive from participating in social groups provide a continuing basis to sustain these groups. These social relations thus get reproduced, sometimes even unintentionally, as long as they benefit the members of the group. It is not so much that public school students do not have any social capital or that their networks are smaller. After all, as Morrow notes, social capital must not be misunderstood as something that only middle classes possess (1999: 761). However, the extent of the economic and cultural capital they possess is often extremely limited, so the benefits they acquire from their social networks are also similarly limited.

Bourdieu's formulation of the three forms of capital demonstrates the mechanism of subjugation of the marginalized. Different forms of capital can be used towards different ends (economic capital to buy things; social capital to get jobs, fix marriages, and bolster relationships; and cultural capital to take leadership positions, wield power, and authority) but they can also reinforce each other and reproduce existing norms. My evidence from Bhumi and Dadagaun clearly shows that those at the margins fall behind in all three forms of capital, thereby limiting their opportunities significantly.

This outcome nexus based on capital is further institutionalized through the actual process of imparting education. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argue that the impact is particularly devastating within the context of the expansion of formal schooling. Compulsory schooling allows the dominated class to give recognition to the notion of what counts as legitimate knowledge, and higher education is monopolized by the dominant class (*ibid.*: 42). They argue that schools produce a particular kind of graduate because their intention is to reproduce themselves within a particular image. It is difficult for the marginalized to compete

with the privileged because the latter use their linguistic and cultural capital to consolidate their gains. The expansion of higher education allows for further differentiation while maintaining the same distribution of outcome based on class (ibid.: 93). Examinations serve as key tools that reward the maintenance of the dominant culture, and they establish a hierarchy of knowledge that determines what to value and what not to value. They hide handicaps based on the distance from dominant class, whose values are heavily weighted in the education system. They thus provide legitimacy through notions of being scientific and neutral (p. 163), and fulfil a demand for social selection by creating academic hierarchies that protect social hierarchies. When some bright candidates who are not from the elite manage to acquire the credentials and to pick up the cultural and social capital required to succeed within the education system, their performance actually provides the illusion of the system's objectivity and openness, even as the elite is strengthened through co-option.

The implications of protecting these social hierarchies are heightened by the fact that education systems conceal themselves under the guise of technical selection. The dominant class use different forms of capital to accumulate education degrees, so their differentiation from the rest of the population appears to be an expression of meritocracy rather than a reflection of their endowment. Those people who fail to compete meaningfully through the school system because of socio-cultural and political-economic reasons then internalize their position in society, leading to self-exclusion where they even feel they do not deserve the same benefits because they are not good enough. Education systems can thus serve the technical function of attesting and assigning capacities as well as the social function of conserving power and privilege, so that social advantage can be turned into academic advantage, which can in turn be used for economic advantage through better employment opportunities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 141-176). The high failure rate within the school system, as has been demonstrated in the case of Nepal, can thus appear to be inefficient in technical output terms, but can be considered extremely efficient in terms of reproducing social order (p. 184), as schools confer further privileges onto the privileged under the guise of meritocracy. As such, I will examine whether and if so, in what way, a Bourdieusian analysis for the failure of successful Bhumi graduates to transition to higher education and employment fits the data.

The work of Bourdieu and his colleagues provides an important framework to understand the experience and performance of Dadagaun residents and Bhumi students. This approach is further vindicated by the findings of other scholars working with similar

populations in various rural and urban contexts around the world. Jeffrey et al. argue that while education has the potential to transform lives, power and culture mediate access to the fruits of education (2008: 3). People from marginalized communities do not always benefit from schooling but often struggle to acquire work, political leverage, and respect. Schooling is differently experienced by different people, so it leads to very diverse outcomes. Schools can also create or perpetuate national, religious, gendered and class identities, beliefs, inequalities and hierarchies (Levinson et al. 1996, Foucault 1980 Bowles and Gintis 1976). Jeffrey et al. (2008) studied the lives of ‘educated youth’ in North India to argue that power and inequality mediate people’s access to educational opportunities and outcomes. While the rich and the powerful use their social and cultural capital to hold on to elevated notions of being educated even in the rare event that they are not able to secure meaningful employment, less-fortunate educated youth experience education in dual, often contradictory terms because they are often trapped by it. Caste and class mediate immediate education outcomes as well as future employment opportunities. Schools do not prepare village students for their likely futures, leading to widespread frustration and disillusionment with the system. Poor people usually do not have the social and cultural capital required to navigate the predominantly urban terrain where employment opportunities are most abundant, and the skills they learn in schools often do not correspond to meaningful jobs.

Peggy Froerer (2012, 2011) has convincingly mapped how education can be a contradictory resource by providing certain benefits to some while also creating new forms of inequality for others. Based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in a village in rural Chhattisgarh, Froerer differentiates education outcomes and subsequent aspirations between different groups (Oraon Christians and Hindus). The relationship between education, employment, and mobility is not linear and unidirectional but depends upon specific circumstances. Schooling is thus fundamentally a social institution that operates in particular historic, social, cultural, and political-economic contexts. Froerer shows that Oraon Christians have been able to gain from their education pursuits for a number of reasons. The Catholic mission station had established a boarding hostel that accommodated Oraon children, and the school strictly adhered to Hindi as the medium of communication. The church also served as a network hub for Christian Oraons that extended beyond the village. Since Oraons did not have much land, the opportunity cost of pursuing further schooling was also lower, and they were more willing to move for employment opportunities. The Oraons thus had access to better education through the Catholic boarding school, better social capital

because of the influence of the Church, and were predisposed to seek opportunities even outside the village. In contrast, the Hindus in the village were skeptic of education beyond 5th grade because it failed to provide employment and income activities. While they valued basic education to acquire literacy skills, further education pursuits placed higher indirect costs (books, uniform) and opportunity costs, as their labour was valuable to the land-owning farming communities. Most Hindus in the village attended schools in their tribal language and did not have an extended network to provide them the social and cultural capital to facilitate education mobility. Pursuing further education did not lead to jobs easily either, and if they failed, they would return to farming, so higher education was not seen as an attractive option by most Hindus. Further education without the necessary skills (such as language) or employment opportunities often limited their marriage prospects. Even though they saw Christians succeed because of their education pursuits, they thus attributed that success to other factors beyond their reach, and limited their own schooling.⁷

These findings are important for numerous reasons. The decision-making process for these Hindus demonstrates that people's aspirations and expectations are not unitary, linear, or static. The inability to secure gainful employment and lack of marriage prospects helps understand "why the Hindu community, broadly speaking, has neither engaged with nor benefited from education and education-related social mobility in similar ways to the Oraon Christian community" (Froerer 2011: 698). The expected positive link between education and income or employment has largely translated into an almost blind belief among ordinary people that the schooling of children will lead to radical changes in their lives, but these outcomes are no longer outcomes to be accepted but issues to be investigated (Valentin 2011: 111). Froerer's work highlights how when school outcomes do not match raised expectations, people's aspirations change to adapt to and reflect these new realities. Education alone is no longer the only path to meeting people's aspirations, as they seek other ways to make ends meet. Cultural and social values are thus extremely dynamic, so just as villagers do not simply accept the status quo but make use of their limited resources and academic degrees to seek upward mobility even when the level and quality of public education is very low, they also seek alternative avenues for this mobility, as I show in the next section.

⁷ There are some notable exceptions to these generalizations, as Froerer shows how a family of Hindu brothers has pursued higher education with some success (2011: 702-3). There are, however, extenuating circumstances which explain this success, even as the general trend remains as described above.

Froerer's work points to the widespread acceptance of *literacy* as an uncontested social good, and even those who are unable to secure further employment through education still continue to seek literacy skills for themselves and their children. The value placed on primary education could be attributed to systemic global practices in recent years, as international efforts and the concurrently-aligned national and local emphasis have concentrated on addressing primary school concerns. However, given the high costs and opportunity costs of higher education, along with the tenuous connection of education to employment, as perceived by these communities, the aversion of some marginalized communities to higher education appears understandable. This self-selection against further education (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) can then perpetuate a vicious cycle, as the continued emphasis on credentialing as well as the increasing gaps between returns to higher and lower levels of schooling (Krueger and Lindahl 2001, Psacharopoulos 1994 Knight and Sabot 1990) further limit opportunities (Lloyd 2005).

This analysis also situates the potential outcomes of education in the larger political economy, where the pursuit of education and the quality of education do not ensure employment opportunities. This approach thus takes into account the historical and political context of the school system as well as the analysis of institutions and individual interests (parents, teachers, students). As described by Froerer, the different life histories, economic circumstances, and extended networks of Oraon Christians and Hindus affect their educational aspirations and their employment prospects differently. A focus on education alone thus misses out not only how education systems can be used as tools for subjugation but also that education alone might not be enough for gainful employment. Even if we were to make the far-fetched assumption that everyone had the same academic credentials, social capital would still play a significant role in securing employment and providing safety networks to those who have the right connections in the right places. The rich and the powerful are in a better position to secure employment or fall back on coping structures when they fall on hard times, while people from marginalized communities find themselves limited in their pursuit of education and employment.

In considering this political economy approach, I also build on Jason Hart's work to better understand public school outcomes. Just as Hart (2008) documents how the wave of research on childhood issues involves adding children's perspectives, the research on education has simply co-opted a vague notion of quality to the debate, without wider engagement with political structures that define and determine these outcomes. As children

are relegated to carry out menial, low-paid jobs in or around their homes, public-school graduates are relegated to carrying out menial low-paid jobs. Their aspirations for well-paid, high-status jobs are not met in the local economy, so they are left frustrated with their under- and unemployment. The opening up of the global economy and the rise of global capital outside the purview of the nation-state has meant that employment opportunities are increasingly available outside the national context (Standing 2014, 2011; Hart 2008). Young people are embracing these international opportunities to meet their aspirations but their gains result not necessarily from work satisfaction or secure employment but the disparity in the purchasing power of different currencies. Global capital relies on a supply of surplus labour in the margins to facilitate accumulation, and these processes are no longer bound by national boundaries. A number of young people are thus migrating abroad to work under extremely difficult circumstances, and the jobs they carry out there are often the same ones they have access to but loathe in their own countries, but various social, cultural, political, and economic factors, which I investigate in greater detail in chapter eight, make their sacrifices worthwhile. Credentialing, education quality, cultural capital, and social networks still mediate mobility and access to these jobs in the global economy, but the availability of low-skilled jobs with decent pay has opened up a new avenue to meet people's aspirations for socio-economic mobility, even as many of these emerging pathways remain gendered.

III. Education as a positional good

Building on the expected education experience for the marginalized in the last section, I argue here that education is partly a positional good because the returns to education depend on the education level of others as well. Education serves as a tool for differentiation, and the nature and relevance of education available to marginalized communities often relegates them to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

Many scholars have persuasively argued that labour-market outcomes and learning ability in adulthood are largely predicted by investments, background, and experiences in early life (Almond and Currie 2011, Cunha et al. 2010, Cunha and Heckman 2008, Engle et al. 2007, Cunha et al. 2006, Heckman et al. 2006, Heckman and Rubenstein 2001), with early childhood key, but education in middle childhood also vital. The spread of formal schooling has coincided with, or more likely even supported by, a growing international claim that education benefits society at large. According to LeVine et al., "a vast body of empirical research assembled by economists, demographers, epidemiologists, and other social scientists

points to this conclusion” (2001: 2). Drèze and Sen have argued that “the spread of education helps to overcome the traditional inequalities of caste, class, and gender, just as the removal of these inequalities contributes to the spread of education” (2002: 143). A common finding of village studies and household surveys is that education is widely perceived by members of socially or economically disadvantaged groups as the most promising means of upward mobility for their children (ibid.: 144; Vasavi 2000; PROBE 1999; Drèze and Saran 1995; Schultz 1971). This idea of emancipation is tied closely to the expectation that education contributes towards improving people’s capabilities and providing valuable skills and knowledge to adapt to the globalizing world (Anderson 1979). A capabilities approach assumes that individuals with certain capabilities can change their lives. The ability to read and write alone allows people to participate more meaningfully in society, and education can ultimately help to fulfil other personal and social roles, empower the marginalized, promote equality, and achieve other positive consequences. However, even though individual agency plays some part, structural constraints are nonetheless so entrenched that education systems may not only fail as a structural force to overcome these constraints but could in some contexts be reproducing or even enhancing structural inequalities.

Although tremendous progress has been made in the last few decades, the spread of formal schooling has been fairly recent in the developing world. This acceptance of education as a tool for emancipation relies on the assumption that education has universal characteristics which fuel economic growth at both personal and national levels. Under this model, schooling is believed to lead to social change by improving people’s capability to alter patterns of social participation. School children can acquire aspirations, identities, skills, and modes of learning that eventually affect their life decisions, and so social change is based on individuals becoming educated, exercising individual choice, and ultimately being able to take advantage of the opportunities available to them through schooling. Education is thus key to successful transition to ‘adulthood’ in modern society, and the life course envisaged in this way is itself linear and unidirectional, regardless of socio-cultural and political-economic circumstances. This narrative is powerful because it rests the ability for upward socio-economic mobility on each individual, and the pursuit of education gives them the tools to overcome their adversity. As a result, the extremely positive link between education and individual upward mobility has been adopted fairly unequivocally within policy circles, represented most recently in the form of international initiatives such as the Millennium

Development Goals and Education for All programmes. These programmes accept these assumptions and support the wholesale expansion of formal education.

However, following Fred Hirsch (1977), I show that this rooted belief in education is a result of the success of the few people who received formal schooling at a time of education scarcity. Hirsch coined the term ‘positional goods’ (Salinas-Jiménez 2011: 410) to refer to those goods whose value depends on whether others possess the same goods. In the context of education, in countries where the general population has little or no education, as was the case in Europe in 19th and early 20th century and many developing countries in the late 20th century, those who had received even a few years of education were differentiated from the rest because of their literary and numeracy skills. This differentiation would allow them to consolidate their position as members of the elite in local contexts, as I show in the Nepali context (Karki 2011). The value of one’s education is also dependent on the educational level of the rest of society (Bourdieu 1986, Hirsch 1977), and as more people get more education, the returns to the same level of education decrease. There are social limits to consumption beyond which the social environment cannot cope unless the quality of the product deteriorates. Getting an education can thus be similar to owning a car; while the earliest owners got the most benefit out of it because they could drive freely in roads with no traffic, as more people buy cars, roads are congested, air pollution increases, and parking is at a premium. The process of expanding education access might thus falter not only because of the physical limitations of providing it to more people but also because of the absorptive limits on its use. As more people buy cars, there is more traffic and at some point there will be enough cars to cause congestion that will add significant travel time to people’s commutes, not to mention the deterioration of the quality of air because of increased pollution.⁸ Hirsch’s analysis blurs the distinction between private and public goods, whereby pursuing education can be a personal preference but it has public consequences too. Each person might make an independent decision to pursue higher education to increase the benefits they receive personally, but such personal acts also have a cumulative effect where the returns to higher education are affected by more people participating in the education sphere. In essence, Hirsch is expanding the notion of diminishing returns to the public sphere: as more people pursue education individually, *ceteris paribus*, the marginal utility of education decreases after a certain point. Education contributes not only in absolute terms,

⁸ In his analysis, Hirsch considers only the instrumental value of education. While this is problematic (see Drèze and Sen 2002), as I have argued earlier, it is consistent with village expectations from education and development, as tangible ‘things’ (Pigg 1992).

leading to the mastery of knowledge, but also in relative terms, providing a basis for differentiation in the population.

Bourdieu's theorization of cultural capital and its conversion in relation to education, which I have documented in the earlier section, complements Hirsch's understanding of education as a positional good. Bourdieu writes

Because the material and symbolic profits which the academic qualification guarantees also depend on its scarcity, the investments made (in time and effort) may turn out to be less profitable than was anticipated when they were made (there having been a *de facto* change in the conversion rate between academic capital and economic capital). The strategies for converting economic capital into cultural capital, which are among the short-term factors of the schooling explosion and the inflation of qualifications, are governed by changes in the structure of the chances of profit offered by different types of capital. (1986: 51)

Bourdieu's understanding of the decision to pursue academic qualification shows not only the expense of such a pursuit but also the reasoning behind it. There is an initial expectation that investment in education will lead to fruitful cultural and economic outcomes, but if circumstances change, as they have in the case of the rapid expansion of mass schooling, then the returns to education are no longer dependent only on these limited academic qualifications. The aspirations of the illiterate parent generation (as well as their children), thus, have to be understood within the historical context within which education scarcity in the populace had provided the precondition for a select few to distinguish themselves. The poor in Nepal regularly attribute their poverty to their illiteracy, and reflect on the success of the literate with regretful jealousy, wishing they had pursued these education opportunities. The aspiration of upward mobility through education stems from this particular role formal schooling had played in the past decades. The value of a degree is relative, so in a country with high illiteracy, the mere fact of literacy or possession of an elementary diploma can be enough to secure a decisive advantage in occupational competition (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977: 182), but these benefits at the same level of education are diluted with the expansion of mass schooling. The outcomes of education thus depend not only on absolute but also relative terms, and the same kind of outcomes cannot be achieved over time if overcrowding takes place.

Adnett and Davies test whether education is a positional good by reviewing the literature and utilising insights from recent economic analyses of consumer behaviour to question which part of education is positional and how big a part positionality plays in educational outcomes (2002: 201). Although they argue that an overall increase in educational attainments leads to overall higher economic and social wellbeing, they concede that “an increase in positional demand for education may not lead to an increase in educational attainments” (ibid.: 201-2). Salinas-Jiménez et al. (2010), using data from the World Values Survey and adopting a life satisfaction approach to empirically investigate the direct effects of education on utility, show that the contribution of education to subjective wellbeing is stronger as fewer people attain a given level of education. They establish education’s positional properties by demonstrating that it does not serve as a tool for differentiation among high- and middle-income respondents, among whom higher education is the norm. However, among low-income class, where half of the individuals have not completed a level of secondary schooling, even this level of education allows people to differentiate themselves from others.

A strict understanding of education as a positional good would posit that the total benefit accrued from education is fixed, so the pursuit of education results in a zero-sum game, where the benefits accrued by one limit the benefits available to another (Adnett and Davies, 2002: 190). I adopt the more nuanced position of Hirsch (1977) that education may be considered as a partial positional good, with its value depending on both absolute and relative levels of education, as well as its relevance to local labour markets. Instead of trying to place education as either having intrinsic or relative value, then, I explore what aspects of education are positional, and how the experiences of marginalized communities relate to these conditions. While accepting that education confers certain benefits to the educated, I am concerned with the circumstances within which education continues to serve as a tool for differentiation, especially in the era of mass schooling in a hierarchical society structured on the basis of caste and class. Within this context, what kind of education do people from marginalized communities receive, and how does it affect their life trajectories?

In pursuing this line of inquiry, I recognize the implicit assumption of an instrumental relationship between education and employment. Although wary of the dangers of a reductive approach, I believe this focus is justified precisely because of people’s educational aspirations, which are linked closely to expectations of positive employment outcomes (Jeffrey 2010, Jeffrey et al. 2008, Katz 2004). However, this is not to suggest that education

only has functional value. Formal schooling confers various skills and knowledge that have intrinsic value and so can improve the lives of school graduates, but I also find that the education available to underprivileged students from rural communities is so poor that they do not acquire such meaningful skills either. Such an analysis is especially timely because of the changes taking place within the education sector. As John Holmwood (2012: 47) puts it,

Education is no longer about developing the individual and their critical understanding by engaging with a subject and teachers immersed within it, but instead is about investment in human capital and employability. The increased stratification of institutions of higher education is designed to be aligned with distinct employment trajectories.

This consideration of the role of education as a tool for differentiation relies on three key aspects of education: the level of education (credential), the kind of education (quality), and the relevance of education (within the political economy). Taken together, these characteristics determine the relative benefits people receive from their formal schooling. I will discuss each of these traits now, beginning with the relevance of education because it sets the stage for the ensuing discussion and also because it receives, in my view, the least attention within education debates. The following section will focus on the implications for marginalized communities and their education trajectories.

a. Relevance of education in the global political economy

Many people pursue formal schooling with the explicit hope that their education will lead to lucrative employment opportunities. At the core of the emancipatory expectation from education for the marginalized is the desire for socio-economic mobility, which is often tied to spatial opportunities. The internalization of the notion that village life equates to underdevelopment then posits formal schooling as the way out of their poverty and their marginality through upward mobility.⁹

The debate on the role of education and even its value as a positional good, including in this chapter, is often couched within the assumption that there are numerous job opportunities available to school graduates. Paul Willis (1977) famously argued that working-class boys in England define their identity in direct opposition to the school system. These

⁹ Ironically, in geographical terms, a significant proportion of this move is downwards, because Nepal is largely hilly and mountainous but most industries and job opportunities are concentrated in the terai (the fertile plains in the South) as well as district and zonal headquarters.

lads did not believe that the school system prepared them properly for the world they were likely to encounter in the future-- even though the middle-class kids got quite an appropriate education for the world *they* could expect to enter-- and the parents often agreed, so they did not allow the school to shape them. When the *lads* had a 'laff', they were not simply being childish but recognizing that, for working-class students, knowledge, certification, and hence job through schooling was a false promise. However, Willis was writing at a time when there was still fairly full employment in the Midlands with relatively well-paid factory jobs, so that the *lads* could still expect to have a respectable working-class future without focusing on formal schooling.

Recent trends in the global economy suggest that such working-class job security is no longer a certainty. Guy Standing (2014) has argued that wages have been declining globally despite increasing productivity (what he calls "the jaws of the snake opening" in his presentations) in the last few decades. He identifies the emergence of a new group of people, the precariat, so-named because of the precarious nature of their employed existence. The precariat do not have job security and are often under- or unemployed for long periods of time. This arrangement is by design, because their transient existence is central to accumulation through exploitation in global capitalism. A key property of this new category is over-qualification.

In early industrial capitalism, most workers were expected to learn a trade that conformed to the skills practised in their labour. Today, it is rare for people to use more than a fraction of their skills or qualifications in a job. 'Credentialism' rules. Having high-level qualifications is just enough to enter the labour-market lottery. For many jobs, candidates must have either a well-connected parent or qualifications greater than could possibly be used by the job in question. This leads to an epidemic of status frustration and to stress from 'invisible unemployment', having underemployed skills. For the precariat today, there is nothing invisible about it (Standing 2014: 25).

A number of important themes emerge here, but the most striking concerns the relevance of education in the global economy. It is clear that it is a necessary component to employment, but the incentives are perverse because they depend critically on high credentials. Whereas academic qualifications, or even literacy and numeracy skills, were enough to secure employment at times of education scarcity, now it is a necessary but not sufficient condition for employment. Whether school graduates are learning the skills or

knowledge necessary to adapt to the political-economic realities within which they find themselves is only one part of the equation. The current education system tests academic success primarily through internal assessments that do not account for the ability of graduates to adapt to the challenges they face in their transition. As Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva (1998) argue, the very schools that have failed to even teach the three Rs (reading, writing, and arithmetic) properly are now expected to teach students more complex values such as multiculturalism, adaptability, and many other great things. They call schools “road to nowhere”, as diplomas guarantee nothing: neither learning nor jobs; neither status nor prestige for the vast majority of the populace. When I interviewed Esteva on May 5, 2014, he referred to current developments as growth without jobs, and claimed that schooling had simply become a rite of passage rather than preparation for life.

The rise in educational qualifications signals increased demand for better jobs, but modernization has not always been accompanied by industrialization in developing country contexts (Liechty 2003).¹⁰ Recent trends of growth in South Asia have also been maintained through the emergence of high-technology advancements that do not rely on labour intensity. People’s aspirations for a better life are shaped by globalized notions of prosperity, espoused through the penetration of mobile phone technology and rise of social media even in rural villages, but when the local economy does not grow to meet these aspirations, the resulting frustration can be debilitating, if also predictable. Expectations from education have thus become global in their outreach, but outcomes depend largely on local contexts (Heissler 2011: 730). While schools are expected to serve as sites of transformation, they also reflect the material and social conditions within which they exist, and so education alone cannot transform the political economy immediately. Dore (1976: 12) argues that if a country begins its deliberate modernisation late in world history, the education system is likely to be mechanical to the point that education certificates serve primarily as tools for occupation selection. He expected that the political economy and historical trajectory of modernity would influence the pursuit of education to lead to qualification inflation as well as exam-oriented schooling, at the expense of what he calls “genuine education”.

¹⁰ In 2013, industry accounted for only 14.5% of Nepal’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP), for instance, and only 7% of the labour force was involved in industry. The industrial production growth rate of Nepal is 1.5%, which ranks the country in the 136th position in the world. Services accounted for 48.7% of the GDP and involved 18% of the labour force, while agriculture contributed 36.8% of the GDP while involving 75% of the labour force. (CIA 2013)

The concerns with the education system go further, because even if the content of the education model were comprehensive enough to prepare graduates with the right skills and knowledge, the social-political-economic realities might dictate different outcomes. The assumption that education provides skills and knowledge which then lead to gainful employment thus come under investigation, because a range of other factors, which will be explored in detail in the next section, also determine this transitional link. Standing's quote highlights connections as a key factor. Bourdieu (1986) has also noted the value of social capital in delivering positive outcomes. He contends that members of particular groups can rely on the backing of other group members to benefit from these networks. These personal networks play a big role in securing employment opportunities so the link between education and employment is tempered by socio-cultural and political-economic circumstances, where connections define opportunities to undermine the relevance of formal schooling to transition to gainful employment (Bista 1991).

b. Level of education

The number of years of schooling or degrees received provides another key avenue for differentiation through education. Since this information is easy to quantify and verify, it allows for easy comparisons between different individuals and/or groups. The expansion of the education industry has not been limited to primary and lower secondary schooling; there has been a concurrent rise in higher secondary and tertiary education. With the spread of mass schooling, secondary schooling qualifications are no longer competitive for gainful employment. This push for higher degrees, however, has led to greater focus on credentialing rather than wider learning through education.

As Ronald Dore (1976) argued in *The Diploma Disease*, much of schooling in the era of mass schooling is mere qualification earning (or credentialing) and the so-called educated are victims of the system of schooling without education. In the process of acquiring qualifications, it is not mastery of knowledge but being certified as having mastered that matters. The mastery gained is only for the purpose of reproducing in an examination, not for real-life future use, and numerous schools emphasize the former rather than the latter. "Education is learning to do a job but qualification is to get a job" (ibid.: 2). More and more people pursue higher degrees now with the hope of getting jobs or because it is required for promotion, ultimately leading to credential inflation where a lot of people have degrees but not necessarily the knowledge they require or the jobs they seek.

The push for credentialing has an obvious impact on employment opportunities, as those with higher education degrees are preferred for a number of reasons. There is an expectation that those in school might have learned something more than those that remained out of school. Higher education credentials also signal to employers that these candidates can endure the challenges of the system and ‘stick it out’. Finally, credentialing makes it easier to hire candidates at a logistical level, because it allows people to dismiss without proper consideration those applicants who do not meet certain credential requirements. Other things remaining ‘equal’, then, it is not difficult to imagine that someone with a high school degree would get recruited over someone who has only completed primary school. Dore (1997) himself refers to Hirsch’s ideas, which came into prominence only after the publication of *The Diploma Disease*, arguing that the pursuit of qualification makes education a positional good. Guy Standing (2014) has argued more recently that over-qualification has become the norm in the quest for employment, as more and more people acquire higher education simply to remain competitive.

c. Kind of education

Another key avenue for differentiation comes in the form of the quality of education people receive through their formal schooling. As Dore (1997) notes, one way to differentiate people is to evaluate the number of years someone has attended school while another is to compare the performance of different people at the same level. However, it is not an easy task to define what constitutes education quality, especially because the study of education quality is a work in progress.

The edited volume by Boyden and Bourdillon (2011) employs longitudinal data from *Young Lives* to examine education trajectories in relation to people’s expectations from education. They find that schools vary in their resources and facilities, with poor students inevitably relegated to low-quality schools. The socio-economic background of students also affects schooling outcomes, and poor students suffer further because of their poverty as well as their parents’ illiteracy. Even when poor children learn well in school, they often struggle to be gainfully employed because of the shortage of well-paid jobs as well as the lack of meaningful networks to be able to access such jobs (ibid.: 272). The disparity in terms of the access, quality, and relevance of education available to the poor in comparison to the rich severely undermines their future outcomes (Boyden 2013: 583).

The high aspirations of young people going through the school system are thus not always realistic, given the significant challenges they face in pursuing higher education and employment. Education inequalities severely affect outcomes, and improvements in school enrolment have not always led to improvements in education quality, particularly for the poor (Murray 2011). Education access alone is unlikely to fulfil the potential of formal education to provide a way out of poverty, and Murray highlights the need to focus on education quality to meet these goals. The stark inequalities in children's progression through school lead her to note that if the implicit promises of education fail to deliver on people's hopes, the gains made in expanding access to education in recent years could be undermined (ibid.: 195).

The recognition that school enrolment and education access alone are not enough for upward mobility is influencing academic research and policy work. Learning Metrics Task Force (LMTF), a comprehensive partnership between the UN and Brookings Institute, brought together a diverse, global team to assess the post-2015 agenda for education, and they strongly recommended that the focus must shift from access to access *plus* learning (LMTF 2014, original emphasis). The MDGs and EFA goals emphasized improving access alone, but the LMTF report notes how many children and youth complete primary and secondary education without the basic knowledge, skills, and competencies they need to lead productive, healthy lives. Yusuf Sayed (2011) has thus argued for a quality element to education, going all the way to the MDGs. He calls for multiple levels of assessment and analysis, going far beyond enrolment, to understand quality holistically and contextually.

The LMTF task force has identified learning to include literacy, communication, numeracy and mathematics, and science and technology in the first phase (LMTF 2013); developed tools to measure this learning in the second phase (LMTF2013a), and have discussed how these measurements improve education quality in the third phase in 2014 (LMTF 2014). As the paradigm shifts beyond enrolment figures, the emergence of a clearer consensus on the need to focus on school quality and learning will help to promote equality of opportunity for the poor (Boyden and Bourdillon 2011: 272).

What constitutes quality?

That a greater consensus is emerging on the need to focus on quality does not ensure broad agreement on what constitutes education quality. According to Peter Moss (2012), the dominant narrative of quality education is that it improves learning, employment, and earnings and reduces social problems; and has a key role in exploiting 'human capital' and

assuring high returns on ‘social investment’. Daniel Wagner’s core components of quality include what learners should know, where learning occurs, how it takes place, and what might be learned in terms of knowledge, skills, competencies, attitudes and values (2010: 742). Valerie Lee and Tia Zuze (2011) emphasize school resources and their effective use as well as teacher engagement as key to education quality. The model of quality education Joyce Epstein (1995) posits students at the centre, with other entities such as family, community, and school remaining interconnected to support individual student achievement. For Cynthia Lloyd, Barbara Mensch, and Wesley Clark (2000), education quality hinges on exam results and student participation. It is clear then that there is no singular, monolithic understanding of quality, but it is understood and imagined in particular, specific ways. Don Adams identifies six common views of education quality in the literature: quality as reputation; resources and inputs; process; content; outputs and outcomes; and “value added” (1993: 7). His review demonstrates the wide range of characteristics that have come to embody this porous concept. The notion of quality education is especially difficult to define because it cannot be reduced to numbers or facts but also includes perceptions, expectations, and long-term outcomes. There is no singular, monolithic understanding of quality, but it is understood and imagined in particular, specific ways.

This debate on measurement illustrates the difficulty of specifying its characteristics. For instance, Lloyd et al. (2000) first identify the crude, aggregate component of quality, characterized by measures such as distance to school, resources per student, teacher credentials, and student-teacher ratios. However, the reduction of quality to simple, measurable traits undermines its meaning significantly (Barrett 2011). Input measures are often taken as indicators of quality because this reductive approach allows for straightforward policy prescriptions: when figures are low, greater intervention is required while high figures denote ‘success’ (Somerset 2011; Heyneman 1993). There is a need to differentiate between school inputs from school resources (Lloyd et al. 2003: 447), because the focus is not only on the level of resource but the effectiveness with which these resources are utilized to strengthen teaching and learning (Somerset 2011). An enhanced understanding of quality, Lloyd et al. (2003) argue, should thus be associated with improved cognitive competencies, higher attendance, reduced attrition, and/or equal opportunities by gender. Even this understanding of quality, however, focuses largely on what happens inside the classroom but not at the school environment more generally (Wiseman et al. 2011), let alone education outcomes beyond the school system. As Jo Boyden and Zoe James (2014) note, we

know very little about the benefits of education across the life-course in developing countries because of sparse evidence.

At the moment, education quality focuses extensively on inputs such as the amount and quality of resources and infrastructure, of teacher training and qualification, and of school enrolment and drop-out rates (Krutikova, Rolleston and Aurino 2011: 201-202). Krutikova et al. acknowledge that these are good measures, but critique that these figures do not tell us much about education attainment and future trajectories. It is ironic then that they rely predominantly on test scores as proxies in their analysis of school quality. Their approach, however, is typical of current efforts to understand and measure school quality, but the process of quantifying learning and quality education is extremely difficult and controversial (Sayed 2011, Wagner 2010). Yet, exams continue to serve as the main measure of success within the school system, and the difference of even a few marks can make a big difference in terms of opportunities available to students (Somerset 2011, Carney and Bista 2009).¹¹ Such an approach is popular because it is helpful to make immediate comparisons to rate individuals and schools. Exams allow for identical qualifications to prepare interchangeable individuals who can take up available posts based on hierarchy and expand a notion of formal equity, and they also provide a way to organize and codify competition (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Besides, quality may be measured and understood very differently, for instance in terms of how education trains people in critical thinking or social skills, but these facets of education are largely ignored by tests. However, school success does not amount to success in life (Boyden and Bourdillon 2011: 273), or even success in higher education, as I show in this thesis.

Although the Brookings Institute and the LMTF now focus on measuring education quality, they acknowledge that measurement alone is not enough. There is a clear need to establish a feedback loop that allows for flexibility and meaningful policy interventions. Continued assessment of school students every term and every year in every school generates a lot of data and evidence, but the lack of a proper mechanism to absorb and interpret this information limits the impact of this process. The primacy of the quantification of education quality through measurements, and in particular exam scores, is a result of the ease of illustrating and comparing findings, but the inherently reductive process can also be problematic in providing a comprehensive understanding of subsequent outcomes.

¹¹ In Nepal, for instance, the SLC results are considered to be the most obvious yardstick of quality by the public and the government (Bhatta 2009, Bhatta 2005)

Brian Street's critique of understanding literacy as merely the acquisition of skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic illustrates the danger of reducing education quality to quantifiable parameters. Literacy must be understood as a social practice (Street 1985), as there are multiple literacies that are determined by time and space, and are also contested in relations of power (Street 2003). He contests that there is a distinction between literacy events and literacy practices (Street 1988). The experience of literacy is socially determined, and literacy practices are underpinned by broader cultural conceptions of particular ways of thinking about and doing reading and writing in cultural contexts (Street 2003). He thus calls for a more socio-cultural and holistic understanding of literacy. This analysis can be extended to education quality to differentiate between school results, which are marked by events such as tests and exams, and school outcomes, which go beyond events to also involve processes that extend to further schooling and employment outcomes. There is thus a need to take a country-driven approach, where education quality is contextualized to reflect the needs and priorities of each education system and its participants (LMTF 2014). The specific features of school quality that matter for educational outcomes are context-specific, and differ based on a number of other factors (Lloyd et al. 2003). For instance, gender roles in society as well as school and teacher attitudes shape the ways in which schools impact boys and girls in particular settings (ibid.: 466). While exams can be one marker of success, then, they cannot be uncritically accepted to represent school quality.

The critique of the recent focus on education quality goes further. Peter Moss (2007) has argued that the overuse of quality renders the term meaningless. Quality is not a neutral or self-evident concept, but it has particular meanings, assumptions, and values. It is produced within a particular paradigm of modernity and a particular historical and cultural context (ibid.: 11). Quality then becomes used as an easy substitute for conformity to universal, predetermined, and expert-driven norms. The drive to measure and compare education quality imposes templates such as rating, scales, checklists, and standardized procedures to all settings, undermining the value of contextuality, subjectivity, and creativity (ibid.; Taguchi 2010). The value of education is not only technical but also political, and for Moss the key questions concern not only how we measure quality but what kind of world we want, what is education for, what do we mean by education, and ultimately what is knowledge and how do we learn? (Moss 2012) LMTF thus calls for the development of global tools to understand quality education that nonetheless remain contextually relevant. Although this is not an easy charge, it is an important one.

When I refer to good-quality education, I have in mind a holistic framework which encompasses the complete learning environment. The relationships between students, parents, teachers, and local communities determine this environment. Good-quality education is both a process and an outcome, so it brings together not just an enabling learning environment (socially and economically) but also helps people aspire to and attain the goals that the community and those pursuing education value. This is possible through a curriculum that provides basic skills such as literacy and numeracy *and* relevant life skills that have value in local, national, and international contexts. The holistic framework thus entails enthusiastic children in enabling environments, supported by their families and local communities, being taught relevant curricula by well-trained teachers using child-centric teaching methods to impart relevant knowledge and skills. I do not limit the understanding of quality education to only internal measures but also to their learning outcomes as well as the impact of schooling on people's life trajectories and long-term outcomes. The success of school graduates within the school system could be considered a measure of education quality, and it can even have implications for future outcomes, but the link between school outcome and further transitions must be explored rather than assumed. The conceptualization of quality education here thus takes into consideration inputs in the form of material resources (classrooms, stationery, sports facilities) and human resources (teachers and their trainings and qualifications, coaches, support staff), content (curriculum, pedagogic approach), as well as outputs in the form of internal outcomes (retention and graduation rate, test scores) and long-term outcomes (skills and knowledge, employment opportunities, life trajectories).

It is not difficult to notice how educational quality can serve as a tool for differentiation. If everyone has the same level of education, those who are considered to have received better quality education are likely to hold a competitive advantage over others. Perceptions are critical to this positionality, because given the difficulties in defining what constitutes quality, the expectation of quality alone could be enough to determine this differentiation. These differences have become most obvious with the privatisation of education, leading to a tiered private/public school system. Private schools market themselves precisely in this fashion, arguing that the education they provide is superior to public schools as well as other private schools (IHDS 2010, Caddell 2006,).

IV. The Second Debate: Of trajectories and transitions

This debate on the role of education and the subsequent outcome feeds directly into the debate on life cycles and the indeterminacy of transition from one stage to another.

The life-stages theory has evolved from van Gennep's *Les Rites de Passage* in 1909 to contributions by Mead (1936), Raum (1940), LeVine and LeVine (1966), Read (1968), and Fortes (1974). According to this theory, everyone goes through the same, distinct life-stages, and they experience similar attributes with each other in those stages. These stages are thus expected to be universal, strictly ordered, and coherent. Education is seen to increasingly play a key role in transitioning from one stage to another. These stages can be loosely sketched as follows: children depend on their parents and care-givers until they attend school, where they learn different skills and knowledge with the help of teachers. These skills and knowledge allow children to mature and seek employment, which helps them assume adult roles such as get married and support a family. Although some internal debate and critique has taken place (see, for instance, Goody 1982 and Moore 1986), the idea that everyone goes through different stages of life in a linear, unidirectional manner, sharing the same attributes within particular life stages, has persevered and even flourished across difference disciplines (see Johnson-Hanks 2002: 866). The model thus assumes that there is a particular, uniform trajectory to transition from childhood through youth to adulthood, and education institutions increasingly provide tangible structures to mediate these transitions.

Although this understanding of transition is widespread, I find the model described by Vogler, Crivello and Woodhead (2008) more persuasive because it accounts for variations within this absolute trajectory. I thus look at transitions from a multi-layered perspective, and highlight how these processes take shape in less-industrialized contexts. Vogler et al. take an inclusive view of transitions, defining them as key events and/or processes occurring at specific periods or turning points during the life course (ibid.: 1). These processes are linked to changes in personal appearance, activity, status, roles, and relationships as well as associated changes in the use of physical and social space, and/or changing contact with cultural beliefs, discourses, and practices, which are often linked to changes of setting and use of (dominant) language. Transitions are mediated through the process of socio-cultural learning as children and young people change their behaviour according to new insights gained through social interaction with their environment (p. 8). The composite view of transition espoused by the authors makes a distinction between vertical and horizontal

transitions. Vertical transition refers to the movement from one stage to another, often with the expectation of an upward shift (Kagan and Neumann 1988), and formal schooling is especially concerned with this transition. However, such transitions are not always mediated only by formal institutions but also through social institutions and customs in the form of rites of passage, as argued by Van Gennep (1909). Horizontal transitions on the other hand refer to the concurrent transitions people make on a daily basis, which are often not distinctly marked but are still significant. Horizontal transitions have not been considered and studied to the same extent as vertical ones, but because horizontal transitions also affect vertical ones, this foresight has limited our understanding of both transitions. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks (2002) further critiques the life-stages model powerfully for its teleological, linear treatment of complex, often uncertain, and ambivalent life trajectories. She argues that transitions are not defined by discrete, predictable movements from one stage to another, but instead depend on the different opportunities and constraints actors face to determine different outcomes. How children transition between home, school, and work, for instance, can directly influence whether children transition from primary to secondary schooling or from formal schooling to employment.

The fixation with the life-stages model is not a relic of the past but continues to dominate understandings of people's transitions today. In the context of education, schools serve as the central institutions that mediate these transitions through childhood (codified through the age-grade system) as well as through youth and adulthood. Children are expected to attend school and gain skills, which allow them to accept jobs and assume adult responsibilities. The very idea of a child is now linked to school attendance, even as children balance other horizontal responsibilities at the same time. Cynthia Lloyd's (2005) edited volume *Growing Up Global* powerfully captures this dominant thinking. The book emerged out of an extensive panel to examine "the changing lives of young people in developing countries at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (ibid.: ix). While the three-year project sought to examine the holistic, interconnected aspects of young people's lives, the book is rooted within the life-stages model of thinking, and this tone is set from the first sentence:

The transition to adulthood is a critical stage of human development during which young people leave childhood behind and take on new roles and responsibilities.

The panel laid out a pre-defined set of outcomes as the criteria for successful transition, highlighting particularly the necessity to prepare for "adult roles" by pursuing

schooling and good health. This transition to adult roles was to be demonstrated by the transition to work, citizenship, marriage, and parenthood. The selection of these categories does not only conform to the notion of a universal, teleological, and unidirectional form of transition, but also fails to reflect the ground realities in the developing world, where many ‘children’ already assume these ‘adult’ roles at a young age while many ‘adults’ fail to successfully meet these standards, as I show in this thesis.

Schooling remains a key component to Lloyd and her team’s treatment of transition, and they make some important observations about global trends. School attendance is on the rise globally, even as large disparities based on wealth and geography remain (*ibid.*). As young people stay in school for longer, Lloyd argues that their transition to employment and adulthood is delayed. Such a model, however, assumes that different life stages are discrete and separate, with each stage assigned particular, contained roles that do not cross over.

The reduction of people’s life experiences into discrete stages might be neat but it is not accurate. People are not bound entirely within insurmountable categories. Often, institutions such as schools order life into determined stages that give the impression that they are rigid but lived experiences demonstrate the fluidity of identity between these groups (Johnson-Hanks 2002). The outcomes of this vertical transitional experience are thus not predetermined but depend largely on how different people negotiate their horizontal transitions based on the opportunities and constraints available to them. Johnson-Hanks calls this nexus vital conjunctures, borrowing “vital” from demographic vital events and “conjuncture” from Bourdieu’s notion of the interplay of structure and action (*ibid.*: 866). These vital moments are critical, and the set of opportunities and constraints available to individuals, influenced by their experiences, aspirations, and socio-cultural and political economic forces, can determine the outcomes. The opportunities and constraints that determine outcomes are thus open to interpretation rather than being structured and predictable.

Vital life events are variable not only in timing and pacing but also in order and synchronization (Johnson-Hanks 2002). As I argue in this thesis, there are “multiple, variable, and often hidden paths” (*ibid.*: 868) to ‘adulthood’. Many children balance their school life with formal employment while many college graduates remain idle because they cannot find any work. Although age is widely considered as the key marker for preparedness, social class and caste as well as gender and birth order may be determinants of children’s daily activities,

life changes, and expectations for present and future development (Vogler et al. 2008, Punch 2001). Gender can become particularly important closer to puberty, as differences between boys and girls become heightened (Vogler et al. 2008: 17). Dercon and Singh (2013) have argued in the Indian context that gender bias emerges in the educational aspirations of parents for their children at age 8, is transmitted to the aspirations of children at 12, and is transformed into gender gaps in test scores related to cognitive achievement at age 15, despite relatively high enrolment levels. The horizontal transitions are unique for girls because of patriarchal socio-cultural norms and concerns around gendered roles, seriously limiting the vertical transitions available to them. Caste, class, and geography-- which have formed the basis for understanding marginality here, and will be discussed further in the next chapter-- further mediate people's life transitions significantly. The interplay of horizontal and vertical transitions represent unique moments of possible change when people draw on different skills, habits, attitudes, and modes of reasoning, ultimately taking unique paths that diverge and intersect. At these critical moments, the stakes are higher in determining future courses, and so can be marked with uncertainties and anxieties. The futures are at once "under debate and up for grabs" as they define "the range of identities that could potentially be claimed..." (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 872). Experiences and aspirations can come together to both shape and determine the possible outcomes at these critical moments.

The assumption that the spread of mass schooling will lead to young people gaining formal qualifications and moving seamlessly to work and to becoming independent individuals is increasingly under scrutiny (Morrow 2012). The balance between school, work, and family life does not follow any set trajectory for young people. The study of transition is deeply concerned with the culmination into adulthood, but the ideal of adulthood with secure and well-paid employment eludes most people from poor and marginalized communities (Jeffrey 2010). A very particular kind of adulthood is being envisaged within this model of vertical transition, one that focuses on individual economic and social autonomy, but this model of adulthood is not universal. The link to the education debate is thus re-established, as people might have high expectations from education, but only under the right circumstances does schooling lead to gainful employment. The nature and extent of people's horizontal transitions allow for the recognition of both the particular constraints that limit the potential for young people and the emergence of new opportunities that can arise out of these critical experiences. Despite the numerous structural limitations that can inhibit achievements, then, those who are able to capitalize in such situations are able to reap the benefits.

The analysis of the experience and outcome of public education has largely emphasized the role of structure in determining outcomes. The public school system and its recipients are caught in a nexus that has failed to deliver on its promises, and the structural constraints within education systems receive significant attention. However, my ethnographic work demonstrates that these outcomes are not entirely predetermined but can be influenced through empowered agency, whereby one person or a group of people find ways to succeed despite these constraints. In particular, I trace the role of dedicated teachers to investigate the scope for success within public school systems. The notion of success is tied unequivocally to exam performance, and the public school in my study has achieved excellent results to the extent that private school students are now moving to enrol in the public school. To understand why this public school is doing so well, I use the framework of Positive Deviance (PD) to look at those actors who succeed under trying conditions, while others might be failing to cope in those circumstances. It is an innovative approach to development that identifies and observes

individuals or groups whose uncommon behaviors and strategies enable them to find better solutions to problems than their peers, while having access to the same resources and facing similar or worse challenges (PDI 2013)

The approach first gained prominence in the field of nutrition, when researchers proposed to address malnutrition by recognizing those parents and households where children were nourished despite facing the same challenges.¹² The incentive was to highlight success stories and explore the potential for replication to be able to provide home-grown solutions to serious problems. The approach would thus not look only at what the problems are and how to fix them, as most approaches to development discourse and practice seek to do, but also to investigate the processes that work within the same constraints and the reasons behind such successes. The approach thus allows us to focus beyond the structural problems to also identify and understand the nature and kind of agency, however limited or broadly defined, within that problematic structure.

Positive Deviance is gaining wider prominence not only in nutrition studies but also in education and development studies (Vivian 2011, Niederberger 2011). In this thesis, I divide the theory of positive deviance into two, discussing a set of established, *positive*

¹² For a more detailed overview of Positive Deviance as well as its policy implications, including in relation to nutrition studies, see Positive Deviance Initiative 2013; Pascale, Sternin and Sternin 2010; and Zeitlin, Ghassemi and Mansour 1990.

pedagogical practices (such as teacher engagement, parent and community participation, and accountability mechanisms) juxtaposed concurrently alongside a set of *deviant* practices. I argue that positive pedagogical practices are crucial to the school's successes, but given the structural difficulties the public school system faces, these outcomes would not be possible without complementary *deviant* practices. In essence, the public school system has largely failed poor people because of numerous structural constraints identified throughout this thesis, but such circumstances can also be manipulated under particular contexts to try to address the shortcomings of the same system. Deviance alone would not lead to these positive student outcomes, while the strong pillars of *local* accountability and transparency allow for this deviance to be accepted. Empowered agency can thus correct failures and help overcome some of the structural constraints within the public school system.

a. Aspiration, Experience, and Outcome

While the trajectory is not linear, institutions such as schools still shape people's aspirations. If schooling outcomes are influenced by social inequalities, regardless of whether or not schooling actually leads to employment or economic activities, those who cannot access schooling opportunities or cannot succeed within the school system are likely to be forced to redefine their aspirations to fit these preexisting perceptions. Arjun Appadurai (2004) has argued that poor people often lack the capacity to aspire because they lack the resources to voice their concerns, with serious implications. He claims that the rich and powerful invariably have a more fully developed capacity to aspire because they can draw on a wider range of social scenes and contexts, including abstract norms and beliefs. He further argues that poor people can aspire too, but their aspirations have less breadth and depth. Appadurai's model is highly deterministic in presuming that structure alone can define aspirations. Poor people might not have the resources to realize their aspirations, but this does not necessarily limit their ability or capacity to aspire. I show in this thesis the breadth and depth of their aspirations, even if they face the predicament where the relationship between education and employment is often irrelevant. Gina Crivello (2009) explored the relationship between migration and educational aspirations among young people growing up in contexts of poverty in Peru to argue that young people have the ability to aspire towards better futures for themselves. However, she acknowledges that Appadurai's concept of 'capacity to aspire' also entails the capacity to map out and plan the necessary steps to achieve these aspirations, so we need to consider their 'capacity to achieve' as well (ibid.: 23). Crivello demonstrates convincingly that young people aspire not only to secure 'professional' jobs through

education but to defend themselves against difficult systems and ‘bad people’, and to pursue different transitions than their caregivers. In this analysis, I will similarly trace how young people’s education experiences shape and evolve their aspirations across the spectrum, including but not limited to their hopes for meaningful employment.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have engaged with three critical debates on the role and relevance of education in the era of mass schooling. First, I have examined the social structures and processes of marginalized communities who have historically come to view education as the primary means of escaping their poverty. However, the costs and opportunity costs of education dictate the level and quality of schooling they receive. Their limited social networks and cultural capital further affect their schooling experiences and future opportunities for gainful employment. Even the successful completion of formal schooling does not guarantee meaningful transitions, because employment opportunities are not only tied to schooling outcomes but also existing hierarchies and the wider political economy of the region. The empirical analysis in this thesis will thus be driven by the experiences of Dadagaun residents and Bhumi students in relation to their socio-cultural capital as well as their political-economic circumstances that determine their education outcomes.

Second, I have explored education’s characteristics not only as a social good but also partly a positional good. The returns to education are not determined only by one’s own education but also of those around them. The historical success of the first few who received even a few years of schooling can directly influence the aspirations of others, but the positive outcomes of that level of education cannot be guaranteed. When education is also a tool for differentiation, the value of one’s schooling depends on the level, quality, and relevance of their schooling. Given the challenges marginalized communities already face, if they receive the kind of education that is considered inferior, their aspirations for upward mobility are unlikely to be met. The opportunities and constraints outside the school system that nonetheless affect the outcomes of employment must also be examined to understand this process of transition. I will thus examine whether, and if so how, education serves as a tool for differentiation to determine how people from these communities fare in their engagement with formal schooling and employment.

Third, I have focused on the life-stages model to investigate how education affects people’s life trajectories. The deterministic expectation that children attend schools where

they acquire skills and knowledge that allow them to secure meaningful jobs to assume adult responsibilities is simplistic and inaccurate. Instead, their ability to negotiate horizontal transitions between school, home, and work directly affects their vertical outcomes, including success in school and beyond. In this context, the very understanding of education success must be scrutinized, because success within the school system, while important, does not guarantee that the school system is successful in meeting people's aspirations for further transitions. I will thus examine the experiences and implications of the evolution of childhood in Dadagaun in conjunction with the rise of mass schooling. I will focus not only on the (public school) structures within which they pursue their aspirations for upward mobility but also on the agency of various actors who regulate and manipulate these structures towards different outcomes.

Taken together, then, the theoretical perspectives developed over the course of this chapter provide the analytical hook to understand and interpret the empirical evidence gathered over the course of this research.

3. Education in Nepal

I. Introduction

In order to situate this research, I present a brief introduction to the education system in Nepal in this chapter. I provide an overview of Nepali society to orient the chapter and the rest of this thesis (section two). The persistence of hierarchy is of particular importance to this thesis. I then examine the history of education in the country, including a summary of some ethnographic research on education (section three). There is clear evidence that education has historically been a prerogative of the elite, and it has been used explicitly as a tool for differentiation. I also address this differentiation and how it affects education for the marginalized (section four).

II. Nepali Society: a socio-political overview

There are a number of prominent characteristics that are used to place and define Nepal internationally.¹³ Geographically, Nepal is a land-locked country positioned between the two most populous countries in the world, China and India. Nepal boasts the tallest mountain in the world, Mt. Everest, as well as eight others in the top ten. Culturally, Nepal is overwhelmingly Hindu, and was, until 2006, the only official Hindu Kingdom in the world. The country is also recognized for being the birthplace of Siddhartha Gautam, who is better known as Gautam Buddha. Politically, Nepal was formally a monarchy under the rule of the Shah dynasty for over two hundred years but is now a democratic republic.

The socio-cultural diversity of Nepal is undoubtedly one of its defining features, and this diversity is closely linked to the evolution of the nation's political and economic circumstances. According to the 2011 Census, 26.49 million people from 126 caste/ethnic groups¹⁴ follow ten religions and speak 123 languages as their mother tongue. The table below provides a brief summary of the diversity within this group.

¹³ This section draws largely on Joshi and Rose 1966, Bista 1991; Whelpton 2005; Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, & Whelpton 1997; Gellner 2008; and Jha 2014. Please refer to these works and their bibliographies for a more detailed analysis of the history and politics of Nepal.

¹⁴ The distinction between caste and ethnic group is blurred in Nepal because of the use of different terminology that cannot be translated exactly. For instance, the Nepali word *thar* denotes a person's last name, but it can also be used to mean or denote a person's caste. Similarly, the word *jat* can be used to denote not only caste but also tribal or ethnic group. Fisher (2001: 192-195) provides a helpful discussion of the difficulties of understanding caste, ethnicity, and tribal groups in Nepal.

Table 1 Diversity in Nepal

Religion	Proportion of population	Mother Tongue	Proportion of Population	Caste/Ethnicity	Proportion of Population
Hinduism	81.3%	Nepali	44.6%	Chhetri	16.6%
Buddhism	9.0%	Maithili	11.7%	Bahun-Hill	12.2%
Islam	4.4%	Bhojpuri	6.0%	Magar	7.1%
Kirat	3.1%	Tharu	5.8%	Tharu	6.6%
Christianity	1.4%	Tamang	5.1%	Tamang	5.8%
Nature Worshipper	0.5%	Newar	3.2%	Newar	5.0%
		Bajjika	3.0%	Kami	4.8%
		Magar	3.0%	Muslim	4.4%

Source: CBS 2012

A brief overview of the different political regimes in the country will allow us to trace the internal dynamics of the country. The modern state of Nepal was created in the second half of the eighteenth century, led by Prithvi Narayan Shah (PNS), who unified a number of small principalities, including the three principalities in the Kathmandu valley: Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, and Lalitpur. Gellner notes that a cliché of Nepalese politics and tourist brochures until the late 1990s had been that many different castes, religions, languages, and ‘races’ of Nepal lived together in tolerant harmony (Gellner 1997: 6).¹⁵ The primacy of religion, caste, and ethnicity is evident in the prominent saying attributed to Prithvi Narayan Shah, who declared Nepal a flower garden of four *varnas* (estates)¹⁶ and thirty-six *jats* (castes) (*char jat, chattis varna ko fulbari*). Although this quote is often cited to underscore the notion of a tolerant society, Gellner has interpreted it as Prithvi Narayan Shah’s concern with keeping Indians out to prevent wealth from leaving the country (1997: 24). Gellner argues that Prithvi Narayan Shah did not want to be a garden of everyone but a true Hindustan of the four *varnas* and thirty-six *jats*.

The caste system is claimed to have been relatively fluid during and immediately after the unification of the country (Bista 1991), but even a generous interpretation cannot deny a clear hierarchy. The ethnic backbone of the new state was formed by the Parbatiya or ‘hill

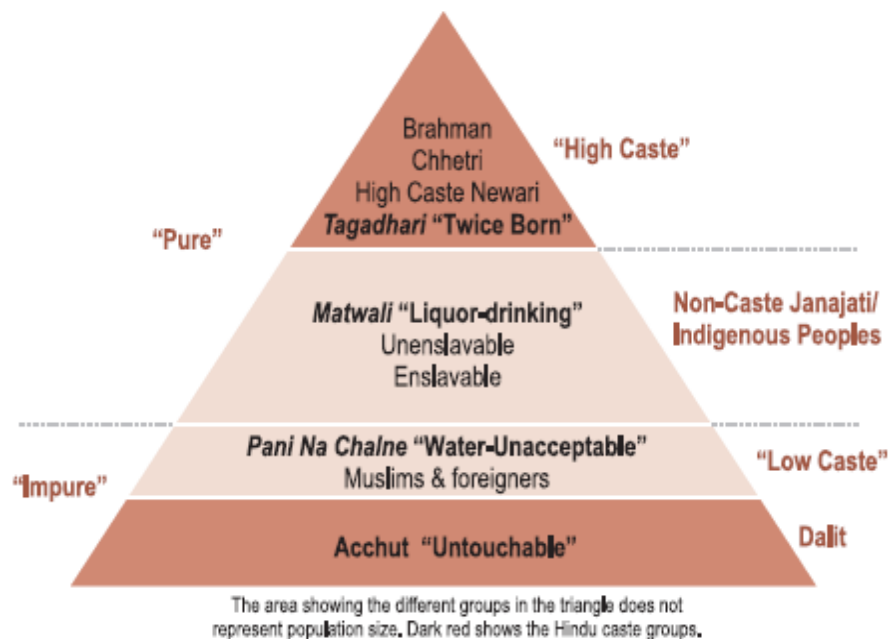
¹⁵ The launch of the Maoist ‘People’s War’ and the subsequent ten-year civil war changed this perception significantly, and I will discuss this later in the chapter.

¹⁶ *Varna* refers to the four scripturally sanctioned status groups of Hinduism: the Brahmins or Bahuns (priests), Kshatriyas or Chhetris (rulers or warriors), Vaishyas (traders or herdsmen), and Shudras (servants) (Gellner 1997: 23).

people’, with Bahuns and Chhetris at the top, and this structure has barely changed in the last two hundred years.

The first major political change occurred with the rise of Jung Bahadur Rana, who rose to power as a military commander and reduced the monarchy to a largely ceremonial role. As the Prime Minister, he established an autocracy which passed from one Rana brother to another from 1846 to 1951. If there was some fluidity within caste groups until that time, Jung Bahadur Rana used Hindu rituals to codify caste and ethnic groups through a legal code called Muluki Ain (law of the land) in 1854 (Höfer 1979). Bahuns and Chhetris retained their status as high caste, alongside high-caste Newars, who were considered to be ‘pure’. They were followed by *matwali* (liquor-drinking) non-caste indigenous groups (today called *janajatis*), who were further categorized into enslavable and unenslavable groups. Next, Muslims and foreigners were considered low caste, further identified as *pani nachalne* (water-unacceptable) group, meaning that they could not touch the food or drink of high-caste people. Finally, Dalits (untouchables) were at the bottom of the hierarchy, marking them as the most impure group. The pyramid diagram below represents this hierarchy.

Figure 1 Caste hierarchy codified by the Muluki Ain in Nepal



Source: DFID and WB 2006: 6

The Muluki Ain thus assigned each group to a very precise position in the hierarchy of castes and regulated the life of the citizens in the smallest details of their life and death

(Sales 2008). Since the Rana regime was extractive at its core, the Ranas treated the country as their personal fiefdom. The ruling elite consolidated their stranglehold over all lucrative sectors in Nepal, while other groups were assigned specific roles to serve their interests.

The analysis of the structure of the army at the time demonstrates effectively how the caste system was sustained in society. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine (2008: 252) notes how the army since the times of Prithvi Narayan Shah had four key ethnic battalions that reflected the division of society into four classes: Bahuns, Chhetris, Magars and Thakuris. The Ranas retained or recreated the same structures, with the King or the Prime Minister as the head of the army, while the highest positions were held by high-caste individuals. The bulk of the troops were mid-ranking groups, including tribal groups. This ensemble was served by low caste groups such as musicians or blacksmiths, effectively reflecting the hierarchies of the broader society.

The fall of the Rana regime in 1951 led to a period of transition that lasted just over ten years. The monarchy had been dormant for most of the previous hundred years, but it was restored into effective leadership, with support from dissident democrats under the banner of Nepali Congress (NC), who had protested Rana rule from neighbouring India. A brief flirtation with democracy led to B. P. Koirala, leader of NC, becoming Prime Minister in 1959, but then-King Mahendra Shah dismissed his government to restore effective power entirely with the monarchy. The period that followed became known as the Partyless Panchayat system, which lasted from 1962 to 1990. The Panchayat state became synonymous with the developmentalist state, as the rhetoric firmly established the need to build the nation for the benefit of all its subjects. The king sought to establish his 'imagined community' in his image, so all dissent was effectively banned. The streamlining of the diversity of the country into a unitary vision of a homogeneous nation necessitated the use of a state-sanctioned religion (Hinduism), a national language (Nepali), and a national identity (Nepali). The Muluki Ain was updated in 1963, which in theory made all citizens equal before the law. However, the continued, official adoption of Hindu ideals meant that caste hierarchy, including notions of purity, remained central to social life in practice.

The Panchayat was mildly authoritarian in comparison to the Ranas, and it claimed to be a developmentalist state, but the difference between rural and urban areas was widening during this period. For instance, based on Alan Macfarlane's (1983, 1994, 2001) longitudinal study, Gellner (2008: 11) notes that the quality of people's diets had declined as the

purchasing power of a day labourer's wage had fallen, crop yields had declined, and the number of animals kept in the village had halved in the village of Thak. Agricultural yields had also declined between the 1960s and the 1990s, while regional differences continued to grow. The poor and the geographically isolated continued to face significant challenges even during this 'developmentalist' era.

The next wave of political struggle was for multi-party democracy, and it came to fruition in 1990. Although political dissent had been banned under the Panchayat system, Nepali Congress had continued to push for democracy in Nepal. They were defeated by the monarchy in a national referendum in 1980, but ten years later they joined hand with the majority of the communists to lead a *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement), which culminated with a partial victory for the democrats. Facing fierce protests from the streets, then-King Birendra Shah granted a constitution to his 'subjects' by declaring the nation a constitutional monarchy and lifting a ban on political parties. The King's absolute power was guaranteed by the constitution as his actions could not be questioned in court, but political parties could compete to form governments under his tutelage.

The next decade of multi-party, parliamentary democracy was fraught with political and social instability. Between the interim government formed under the leadership of KP Bhattarai after the *Jana Andolan* and the dissolution of SB Deuba's government by then-King Gyanendra Shah in 2002, the government changed twelve times (Gellner 2008: 14). The new system had pinned its hopes and legitimacy even more firmly on development, as evidenced by their decision to rebrand village Panchayats as Village Development Committees (VDCs). The government relied heavily on foreign aid to deliver this 'development', but widespread corruption, leakage, and political instability regularly undermined effective implementation of development policies.

At the same time, dissenting voices from ethnic and indigenous groups that had been suppressed during the Panchayat era found voice under the protection of freedom of speech. The notion of indigeneity, for instance, gained prominence in the Nepali context in opposition to hierarchically minded Hindus, with the alleged emphasis of indigenous people on "the principle of egalitarianism...and gender equality..." (Indigenous 1994: 3; quoted in Gellner and Karki 2008). Their key demand for inclusion called for

the use of ethnic languages besides Nepali, traditional customs and culture distinct from high castes and Hindu culture, written or oral history that traces their line of

descent back to the occupants of their territories before the annexation into present Nepal, and included in the list of *adivasis/janajatis* published by the government (Gellner and Karki 2008.: 111).

The widespread demand for a more accommodating, multi-cultural Nepal was a direct challenge to the status quo of high-caste dominance. In past decades, Bahuns, Chhetris, and Newars predominantly controlled state resources, and under the Panchayat period, Bahun-Chhetri symbols, norms, and modes of being were smuggled in to development and school discourses as normative (Pigg 1992). Throughout this time, many low-caste people had rapidly gone through the process of Sanskritizing (i.e. adopting high-caste social and cultural values such as using Bahun priests and giving up pork and alcohol, which were considered impure) to adopt dominant socio-cultural norms (Krauskopff 2008, Sales 2008). Activists from minority ethnic groups wanted to halt this trend and sought a more egalitarian power-sharing mechanism, and the post-1990 political environment provided the space for such activism. Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) was formed in 1991 to be a federal umbrella group bringing together one representative member organization for each ‘nationality’ or *janajati* in Nepal (Gellner 2001: 187). NEFEN evolved in the mid 1990s to become Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), and there are currently 59 member organizations that are further categorized under five so-called ‘developmental stages’ (endangered, highly marginalized, marginalized, disadvantaged, and advantaged) based on their historic and current circumstances (see Gellner 2007: 1826 for details). This categorization is in recognition of the differentiation even within the indigenous, and each group’s position is supposed to determine the preferential treatment they should receive from the state.¹⁷

The concerns raised by indigenous and ethnic groups were justified because the domination of high-caste groups in general and Bahuns in particular had gotten worse in the years following 1990. Karl Heinz Krämer (2008) shows, for instance, that NC, the only party to get a majority in Nepal, was overwhelmingly high-caste. Immediately after the general elections of 1999, of the 30 Central Working Committee (CWC) members of NC, 16 were Bahuns, 5 Chhetris, and 3 Newars. Almost 40% of elected Members of Parliament were Bahuns, even though only 12.6% of the total population was Bahun, according to the 1991 Census. The remaining 60% were dominated by Chhetris and Newars. Predictably, there were very few Dalits in the lower house of parliament, even though their population was

¹⁷ I discuss the history and politics of indigeneity in Nepal in Karki (2011). Please also refer to Gellner 2011, 2001; Gellner and Karki 2008; and Onta 2006 for a wider discussion of the subject.

roughly equal to that of Bahuns. Most of the chief editors of daily and weekly newspapers and magazines were also Bahuns, who identified with the ruling elite. According to Govinda Neupane (2000), out of 235 judges in Nepal's judicial system, 181 were Bahun/Chhetris and 32 were Newars, so high-caste groups accounted for 91% of the total judges in the country. Similarly, 95% of the 245 heads of public administration were from high-caste groups, with 190 Bahun/Chhetri and 43 Newars in those positions. This high-caste dominance in politics, judiciary, and bureaucracy demonstrates their control over the state.¹⁸

The next wave of political struggle was waged by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in the name of 'People's War' in 1996.¹⁹ A core Maoist demand to the government at the time had been that all kinds of exploitation and prejudice based on gender, caste, class, and geography should be ended.²⁰ The unequal distribution of power complemented by the disparity between rural and urban areas, the extreme discrimination faced by low-caste and Dalit citizens, and the uncertainty about the rights of indigenous people provided the impetus for an underground movement and a civil war that lasted a decade and accounted for more than 13,000 lives.²¹ Then-King Gyanendra Shah had dismissed the government in 2002 under the pretext of its inability to deal with the Maoists, and he continued to assume greater authority over the years. Ultimately, the common enemy in the form of the monarchy provided the basis for the Maoists to forge an alliance – with considerable Indian facilitation - - with the political parties (the Seven-Party Alliance). With immense pressure from the streets in the form of *Jana Andolan II*, the King was forced in 2006 to relinquish his power and pave the way for a new republic. The epitome of caste- and religion-based privilege was thus removed from the Nepali polity.

While these outcomes are historic, they must not be overstated. The Maoists fought in the name of equality for all, and although their central committee is more representative than those of NC or UML, the top leadership has remained almost exclusively high-caste, not

¹⁸ Following Susan Hangen, it must be noted that “while there is a clear pattern of hill high-caste Hindu dominance, not all individuals from this group are privileged” (2010: 30). Since a group of high-caste Hindus have maintained a particular advantage in accessing state resources, critiques of the inefficient state take the form of opposition to high-caste Hindus. Poor high-caste people can draw on some cultural resources to benefit from a status-quo that favours their own kind, even if the access available to poor high-caste people can be severely limited.

¹⁹ The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) split into the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), UCPN (M) and the Communist Party of Nepal- Maoist (CPN-M) in 2012.

²⁰ The original list of the Maoists' 40 demands can be found online at http://www.humanrights.de/doc_en/archiv/n/nepal/politics/130299_40demands_Maoist.htm.

²¹ For a more comprehensive analysis of the Maoist movement, see, for instance, Jha 2014, Pettigrew 2013, Lecomte-Tilouine 2013, Lawoti and Pahari 2009, Hutt 2004, Thapa 2003, and Karki and Seddon 2003

unlike their other political competitors. The fact that the Maoists emerged as the largest political party after the Constituent Assembly elections in 2008 demonstrates the support they enjoyed in the grassroots, but no political solution has been reached in the last six years even to promulgate a constitution. The voices from the margins-- such as from the Madhesis in the southern plains and from various ethnic groups in the central hills-- continue to grow louder to demand equal rights in policy and practice. The euphoria of the most recent political transition is slowly eroding as the state has failed to meet the aspirations of the people who have endured and sacrificed a lot to reach this stage.

In some ways, then, although many things have changed, some others stay the same. While the monarchy has now been replaced, a high-caste elite group continues to dominate party politics. Nepal remains a “heteronomous society with a complex ethnic mix, overlaid by disparities in social and economic opportunity”, as Bista (1991: 1) noted almost 25 years ago. He argued that collectivism manifests in a particular social institution of much importance known as *afno manchhe* (one’s own people), and the resulting inclusion and exclusion would determine cooperative action. Those high-caste people who have been able to consolidate their position as the elite are able to use their extended *afno manchhe* connections, akin to negative social capital (Adhikari and Goldey 2010), to further improve their personal circumstances. Conversely, the interaction of history and the country’s geographic, ethnic, and linguistic diversity continues to relegate those at the margins to the bottom (CBS, WB, DFID and ADB 2006). The poverty headcount rate, for instance, is lowest for Newars and Bahun-Chhetris (14% and 18% respectively), whereas it is highest for Muslims, hill *janajatis* and hill-terai Dalits (41%, 44% to 46% respectively). Further, income poverty is both a cause and an effect of exclusion, so the rich continue to consolidate their position while the poor struggle to make ends meet. It must be noted though that these caste hierarchies were officially abolished in 1963 (Bista 1991: 44). The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) reaffirmed that all citizens are equal before the law and discrimination on the basis of religion, race, sex, caste, tribe, origin, language, or ideological conviction can be punished by law. Yet, as I have argued earlier, traditional hierarchies continue to persist across the spectrum, but they do so in a more informal and ‘hidden’ way, and as networks of kin and friends that run along caste lines.

This socio-political overview thus demonstrates the central role of hierarchy in Nepal. In recent times, the Panchayat-era development state followed by multi-party democracy and now a democratic republic led to high expectations for ‘development’. Krishna Bhattachan

(2007) has remarked that $Frustration = Expectation \div Achievement$. The low level of social and economic development, lack of public accountability, and continued paternalistic relations and clientelistic attitudes have already led to disappointment and frustration among the Nepali people, planting the seeds for the Maoist movement (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004; Carney 2003). Various governments have introduced half-hearted reforms that raise expectations without changing the outcomes, especially because the plans and policies on paper are not implemented but subverted (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2008: 74). Nepal is still recovering from the decade-long civil war fuelled by the frustration caused by high expectations and deep disappointments (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004).²² It is within this context that I examine the role and relevance of education, first historically in the next section, and then in contemporary times over the course of this thesis.

III. History of Education in Nepal

Formal schooling began in Nepal in 1854 when the then-Prime Minister established a school in Kathmandu to educate the ruling elite (Khanal 2011), but the Ranas deliberately sought to perpetuate backwardness and ignorance among the general populace by prohibiting education for the masses (Joshi and Rose 1966: 37). The British Residency Surgeon recorded there was no real education in Kathmandu in 1877, with only the richest getting any kind of access to it, in the form of foreign tutors (Rana 1967). This was part of an explicit policy of restricting education only to the elite. Durbar High School was established first to cater only to the Ranas, although other high-status people could attend the school after the death of Jung Bahadur Rana (Bista 1991: 119). Tri-Chandra College was established as the first institute of higher education to provide college level education in 1918. The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) board was established in 1932 with accreditation from India to administer a nationwide 10th grade exam, and this mandatory exam provides a major basis to judge students as well as schools to this day.²³ By 1950, there were 310 primary schools, eleven secondary schools and one college in Nepal, most of them in Kathmandu (Rana 1967). These numbers allude to a growing official emphasis towards education but are misleading as most of these schools were set up by people in defiance of government policy. The Rana leaders feared that

²² The 'youth bulge' theory makes a similar case, arguing that raised expectations combined with growing numbers of young people entering a constrained job market contribute towards violent conflict. See Beehner 2007, Urdal 2006, and Fuller and Pitts 1990. Also see Shields and Rappleye 2008 on the different faces of education in relation to conflict in Nepal.

²³ Most school exams in Nepal test memorization abilities rather than understanding and application of knowledge (Dixit 2002) but the public and the government continue to view them as the yardstick for school quality (Bhatta 2009, Bhatta 2005).

an educated citizenry would pose a threat to their despotic rule by creating a conscious class among the Nepalis who could form the vanguard for a revolution against them (Sharma 1990). The Ranas thus acknowledged the empowering role public education could provide for the masses. As a consequence, at the end of 105 years of Rana rule, only 2% of Nepal's population was literate and only 0.9% of all 6-10 year-old children were enrolled in school (ibid.: 6).

The restoration of effective monarchy after the end of Rana rule—with unintentional irony known to most Nepalis as ‘the coming of democracy’-- saw the expansion of public schooling facilities throughout Nepal. In the 1960s and early 1970s, the government established a series of educational commissions, boards, and committees to plan and implement a nationwide educational system (Skinner and Holland 1996, Seddon 1987, Aryal 1970). Education for the populace was tied to discourses of economic and social development, modernization, and national identity (Skinner and Holland 1996: 275). According to the National Education Plan, the primary goals of education in Nepal were economic development and nation-building (MOE 1971). The Plan saw education as an investment in human resources for the development of the country and called for unifying education into one productive system that served the country's needs and aspirations (ibid.: 1). The late King Mahendra, the architect of Nepal's partyless Panchayat system, noted at a teacher's meeting at Tribhuvan University (the central university of Nepal, named after his father) that the common goal of the education strategy was to create stability, order, peace, and above all national solidarity (Malla 1982).

As I have argued in the last chapter, schooling cannot be theorized just from within, taking into account only internal markers such as infrastructure, teachers, pupil, and school curriculum. Education has to be understood in relation to broader visions, policies, and practices that contextualize education within the wider political economy in the region, as Madsen and Carney (2011) have argued in the Nepali context. Key globalization trends of connectivity are juxtaposed against lived realities, and the engagement with education reform at the national level is representative of flirtations with modernity, where students are expected to deliver on lofty promises to develop the nation. Under the Plan, the school system placed emphasis on nation building while higher education was supposed to lead to economic development.

Education planning, which has been recognized as the route to modernity throughout the Third World (UNESCO 2004; UNICEF 2000; WCEFA 1990; Shils 1956: 12), has received top priority in Nepal as well. Lionel Caplan (1970: 8) argued that advisors convinced emergent nations that literacy would be an essential prerequisite for economic development. This plan was relatively feasible because it focused on infrastructure, so schools could be built all over the country in a short period of time, creating a false impression of progress. Consequently, between 1950 and 1960, the number of primary schools throughout Nepal increased from 321 to 7,256; secondary schools increased from eleven to 1,065; and Tribhuvan University was created (Ragsdale 1989: 14). The National Education System Plan for 1971-76 notes that primary enrolment increased fifty-seven times, secondary enrolment increased 144 times, and higher education increased 375 times between 1951 and 1970. Such a programme of expansion became an exercise in national self-help, and the number of education institutions established each year the measure of the nation's progress, without regard for the necessary human resources and curricular development required to establish a functioning education system. Ragsdale quotes the criticism of Kamal P. Malla, a retired English Professor who was once a University Rector at Tribhuvan University, to make his case:

Till yesterday we and our educationalists were satisfied with statistics...The fact is...that these figures tell only a partial and distorted truth. (Malla 1969: 11)

Ragsdale further notes:

Rapid proliferation of schools and low government expenditures combined with Nepal's difficult geography and weather and tradition of centralized administration to defeat most efforts for qualitative change. (1989: 16)

The emphasis at the time focused on expanding the visible elements of education such as infrastructure and enrolment, without the supporting impetus to improve education quality.²⁴ Even considering only the numerical expansion of schools, villages only got primary schools whereas secondary schools were in larger towns beyond the reach of the villagers (ibid.). As a result, Kathmandu valley, with only 5 percent of the nation's population, produced 60.1 percent of Nepal's graduates. The situation has not improved

²⁴ Martha Caddell (2007a) has argued that the expansion of the school system was itself seen as a symbol of Nepal's modernity and development.

much: many of the rural schools, especially in hilly areas, only teach up to the 5th grade, requiring villagers to commute long distances to continue their education.²⁵

Since education had traditionally been the prerogative of upper classes and has served as a powerful symbol of status, people from lower classes have pursued education opportunities to achieve higher status and privileges (Bista 1991: 5-6). Dor Bahadur Bista, who is considered the father of Nepali Anthropology, claimed that education was not about acquiring intellectual powers or technical skills, and it had come to represent ritualistic behaviour that is expected of everyone in the country. Although education opportunity was severely restricted during the Rana regime, some Nepali schools started to produce clerks to help the ruling elite, creating a two-tier education system. In the early 1950s, even marginal qualifications were enough to ensure good jobs, so education opportunities were extremely attractive (ibid.: 121). Bista notes that the diplomas people received from Nepali high schools or even the prestigious Durbar High School bore no relation to job preparation, but simply marked credentialing and privilege. In his view, the pursuit of formal schooling thus progressed in a vacuum, because it provided only status, while jobs depended largely on personal connections.

The National Education System Plan (NESP) that began in 1969 heralded a new regime of education, which was nationalized by the state under the leadership of King Mahendra. As the National Education Plan of 1972 documents note, primary education (1-3) was supposed to focus on achieving proficiency in the three R's (reading, writing and arithmetic), lower secondary education (4-7) aimed at improving this proficiency but also exposing students to work situations by including pre-vocational training in the curriculum, while higher education was directed towards supplying the country with manpower needs to improve development (Graner 1998: 195). NESP represented a more aggressive attempt to mould the Nepali national into a particular image that served the rulers (Caddell 2007a: 15). The Plan sought to promote national unity and the assimilation of individuals into the mould of the Nepali nation state, so it used the rhetoric of similarity to claim that the programme would provide a level playing field for all. One of the stated goals of NESP was to "counteract the elitist bias of the inherited system of education by linking it more effectively to productive enterprises and egalitarian principles" (MoE 1971).

²⁵ At the same time, we can observe an opposite trend in some rural areas in Nepal, where primary schools upgrade to secondary schools, which in turn upgrade to higher secondary schools. These 'upgrades' often take place without the material and human resources required to cope with the needs of higher education, undermining the quality of the expansion of formal schooling.

Even as the Plan sought to exert more central control over education, then, it also purported to promote greater social mobility and provide more opportunities for the development of the citizens and the state.²⁶

One interpretation of the failure of the NESP model is related to the reaction of the elite. The NESP model introduced institutionalized entrance exams as well as final exams to regulate school and university opportunities across the nation, which worried high-caste people because their future opportunities were threatened, at least in theory. The educated elite had apparently accepted NESP extremely reluctantly, and they felt that it was imposed on them by a powerful minority (Bista 1991: 125). Bista claims that the King and the Crown Prince at the time were extremely sincere about NESP, but personal and social connections continued to dominate NESP operations, and general consensus emerged that the model had been pushed rather prematurely. Even strong supporters of the model expressed their unhappiness by either sending their children to schools not operating under NESP or challenging the outcomes of NESP if their children did not succeed within it (ibid.). The exam system had also been overhauled for the first time, so students had to work hard and prove their competence regularly, rather than only during annual, final exams.

The requirement of examinations threatened the system of privileges by emphasizing on competence. Some of those in higher positions became concerned that their own children might not be able to achieve the same status if they were to fail entrance examinations.

As the failures from the higher status increased, so, too, did the demands for the abolition of examinations. Students sabotaged the examination system through widespread and large-scale cheating, which was frequently ignored by supervisors and teachers. Cumulatively, there was enough opposition to ensure the demise of the NESP system. The entrance examination was the first reform to be discarded, and slowly the most effective parts of the system were dismantled. The NESP collapsed by 1979. (Bista 1991: 127)

Bista thus argues that education opportunities in Nepal were geared primarily towards high-caste and highly placed people, so any education reform that threatened their privilege faced serious obstacles. Even after the expansion of education opportunities, newly educated people tended to identify with these classes. As a result, educated people began to despise physical work and rural livelihoods, seeking education degrees instead to escape their

²⁶ See Khanal 2013, Caddell 2007a, and Onta 1996 for a more detailed analysis of NESP.

immediate circumstances.²⁷ Bista exemplifies this phenomenon by referring to graduates of Agriculture College who had no interest in pursuing a career in agriculture but simply intended to use their degrees to seek access to lucrative bureaucratic positions. Education's historic role and association with status and elite identity in Nepal thus shaped people's perceptions and expectations from education, which have manifested in terms of credentialing for employment.

Bista's interpretation is only one explanation for the ultimate demise of NESP. Although some high-caste people were unhappy with the expansion of mass education that challenged their socio-economic status, there were other factors that made the Plan untenable. K. P. Malla notes that the Plan failed because of the dual divergent pressures the university faced at the time. On the one hand, the 'political imperative' required the university to admit all students who sought admission, regardless of whether the University had the teachers or facilities to accommodate these students (Malla 1982). On the other hand, the 'economic imperative' meant that the university was forced to function with whatever budget the Ministry of Finance allocated to the University, irrespective of the number of students forced upon the institution. University teachers also had the security of tenure, so they got paid regardless of whether they taught or not. This left the actual teaching and running of departments in the hands of a few conscientious and overworked individuals. The increased demand represented people's aspirations for upward mobility, but the education system was not equipped to provide meaningful education to the masses. Subsequently, nearly 70% of students failed one or more courses during the first semester of 1979, leading to widespread frustration and disillusionment among the aspirant youth (*ibid.*). The political-economic circumstances at the time did not help matters either. Nepal was under the direct rule of the monarchy, which faced sustained attacks from underground political parties and student unions. The Panchayat government had expected the Nepali economy to grow at the rate of 4% per annum at the end of the Fourth Five-Year Plan (1971-76), but the actual growth rate was only 0.49% (*ibid.*: 4). The production of low-level and middle-level manpower through higher education was intended to be absorbed by a growing and healthy economy, but the relative stagnation of the economy left many newly-qualified graduates unemployed. Although Malla assesses the objectives of the Plan to be laudable, the poor implementation of the programme meant that students were extremely frustrated with their failure within the

²⁷ Bista 1991 and Pigg 1992, among others, make this argument in the Nepali context, and I have documented this disenchantment of educated youth from agrarian and rural livelihoods in my previous work (Karki 2011). Others have made similar arguments elsewhere: for instance, Jeffrey 2010 in India and Katz 2004 in Sudan.

University system. This led to widespread protests, including violent uprisings in Kathmandu, which ultimately led to the collapse of this education reform.

Schools have been spaces for fierce political contestations for decades (Caddell 2007a), exemplified most recently through active student demonstrations that helped topple the monarchy to declare Nepal a federal republic in 2006. All major political parties have affiliated student groups and unions to further their interests. The politicization of education has filtered down even to the level of primary and secondary schooling, including through various teacher union activities. Teachers account for about 60% of all civil servants, and so serve as major vote banks for political parties (Dixit 2002). Such politicization can unnecessarily detract the education mission of various schools, as political interferences rather than school interests can dominate hiring as well as operating practices, particularly by meddling with School Management Committees (SMCs) and their policies.

SMCs have been established as a recent initiative to promote local ownership of education throughout the country, with the belief that community participation in schooling is essential to achieve efficient, accountable, and sustainable outcomes (Carney and Bista 2009: 189). The Seventh Amendment (in 2001) to the Education Act of 1971 renamed all government-supported schools as community schools and mandated that the SMCs would be elected by parents, rather than nominated by the District Education Office (DEO) (Edwards 2011: 73). The committees were granted greater authority through decentralization, but the DEO could dissolve the SMC if it were unable to fulfil its responsibility. Further powers vested in the centre, such as the teaching of a nationalized curriculum and testing and certification from above, led to confusions over the nature and extent of decentralization.²⁸ In any case, the process gained momentum in 2003 through the Community School Support Project (CSSP) with the World Bank's support to encourage more say for parents in SMCs to appoint and supervise teachers locally, resulting in SMCs in over 10,000 of 28,000 primary schools by 2007 (Carney and Bista 2009: 190). At least 30,037 (MoE 2012: 83) out of 34,361 schools (ibid.: Annex II) in the country now have SMCs.

In reality, SMCs have provided fertile ground for political manipulation in many schools, as the parent committees have often been co-opted by local elite and their political interests to further personal agendas (Paudyal 2012, Khanal 2011). Given the ironic top-down

²⁸ See Edwards 2011 for a more detailed analysis of the rules, regulations and implications of the new emphasis on School Management Committees.

imposition of decentralization, political parties seek to nominate and elect their representatives to extend their influence into schools, while candidates themselves attempt to use SMCs as their launching pads into political life (Edwards 2011: 78). Since local elections have not been held since 1998, SMC elections also provide a platform for political parties to flex their political muscle.

Despite these challenges, education reform in the last few decades has undoubtedly increased access for the masses. The recent emphasis on ‘education for all’ has also yielded some results: according to the latest Census, the literacy rate has increased to 66% (CBS 2012). The enrolment rate in primary education has increased from 64% in 1990 to 89% in 2010 and the retention rate to grade 5 has reached 81% (UNDP Nepal 2011). However, these numbers do not speak of what, if anything, students actually learn, or whether the numbers change drastically thereafter. The numbers are often distorted, taking into account only the enrolment rates at the beginning of the year, not actual attendance rates (Graner 2006). The pass rates are low across all national exams, as evidenced by the pass rate of 47% in the SLC exam in 2012 (Paudyal 2012), 40.38% in 11th grade (Rauniyar 2013), and 38.58% in 12th grade for the humanities stream in 2013 (Republica 2013). These low pass rates reflect the fact that students are not learning enough to meet the lowest expectation level set by the state. Gender, caste, and geography are crucial in restricting education access and performance: boys, students from high-caste communities, and students in urban areas perform disproportionately better than girls, students from low-caste communities, and students in rural areas (Stash and Hannum 2001, Shields and Rappleye 2008a). The evidence on gender and education is not entirely obvious though, as some progress is being made. Before 1990, women barely had any opportunities for education, and girls only got to study if the family had no brothers (LeVine 2006). Despite some recent progress, gender gaps have not changed over time, even among more educated class and caste groups (Stash and Hannum 2001). These findings do not only reflect the shortcomings of the education system but also demonstrate wider social and cultural values that are biased against girls.

In deeply rooted patriarchal societies, girls and women are expected to carry out a significant share of household work, so girls are more likely than boys to discontinue their education (Hart 2008). Although the spread of mass schooling as well as the high expectations from education have meant that more girls are now enrolled in schools, I show in later chapters that they now have to balance the added pressures from schooling with minimum respite from the disproportionate amount of time carrying out household work.

Even when discrimination is not explicitly obvious, related considerations nonetheless limit education opportunities for women. I also show that employment opportunities as well as migratory trends point to similar gendered trajectories, to the disadvantage of women.

Education has been viewed by policy-makers as central to societal transformation, particularly after the return of democracy, to inject a sense of social cohesion (Carney and Bista 2009: 197). Some of the current education policies have even tried to respond to some of the social and structural constraints. The fact that Dalits accounted for 12.77% of the total Nepali population but made up only 1.4% of the total student body (Bhatta et al. 2008, CBS 2001) demonstrates the extent of the problem. To address this concern, as I show in chapter six, the government now provides a cash stipend to Dalit parents if they send their children to school. The Finance Minister has recently pledged to provide monthly stipends to high-achieving Dalit, Chepang, and Raute students, as well as girl students belonging to Dalit, Muslim, and backward areas in Terai-Madhesh (Mahat 2014: 36-37). The Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) has also mandated scholarships for hardworking and high-achieving disabled, Dalit, indigenous, and poor students exclusively from public schools. The scholarship is thus inclusive in its mandate, taking into account a composite view of need and merit which includes caste, class and ability. Each college that admits +2 students is required to register with HSEB, and as a condition of its registration, it has to provide 3% of its total seats in the Intermediate level to public school graduates. Once their status is verified by HSEB, these students do not have to pay admission or tuition fees for the duration of their study. These efforts highlight the official acknowledgment at the policy level to provide extra support to certain disadvantaged groups, although I illustrate in subsequent chapters that the failure to implement these policies effectively severely undermines education outcomes for these groups.

a. Ethnographic Evidence from Nepal

A snapshot of ethnographic research on rural schooling provides a powerful window to examine existing educational practices in Nepal. Tod Ragsdale (1989) examined education changes and how they were received locally by an ethnic minority, the Gurungs. This detailed ethnographic work conducted in the 1970s in western Nepal situates the centrality of schools in the village, elaborating on the school curriculum, community relations, teaching methods, teacher qualifications, and enrolment and graduation rates. Ragsdale's ethnography took place at the helm of the Panchayat era, when public schools provided the only avenue for formal schooling in rural villages. The new curriculum that had been introduced clearly

favoured cultural knowledge that would only be available to those in Kathmandu, as the Gurungs could expect to find virtually nothing of their own culture, history, or language in either the primary or middle school texts (p. 119). Further, most of the curriculum in Nepali and Social Studies depicted national heroes from high-caste groups such as Bahuns and Chhetris, while Gurungs only appeared as women weaving rugs and carrying water or as farmers. The disparity in the language, symbols, and culture placed significant burden on children as they attempted to transition horizontally between home and school, which affected their vertical transitions. Consequently, all 3rd grade students in Ragsdale's village failed their 1974 examination. This exam was central to being able to continue with their education (and indeed present a degree to get a job), and the teachers recognized there was no other way out for these children: they thus doctored the results to pass most students. Half the teachers and staff at the schools in the region were local Gurungs from the same Village Development Committee (VDC), while the non-Gurungs were from other places in Kaski district. Ragsdale notes that since most of the teachers were either locals or identified with the difficulties of being a student from a rural background, as most of them were pursuing higher degrees themselves, they sympathized with their students. They were also aware that local villagers as well as district education officers might hold the teachers accountable if all their students failed. However, even while doctoring the results, the teachers still failed two of the Gurung students (four non-Gurung students also failed the examination, but they had not even bothered to appear for the final exam) in order to make the results seem credible. Examinations served not to test what students knew but to distinguish some students from others in what would appear to be a credible way. They are thus important tools for differentiation within the education system. Ragsdale's analysis raises important questions about the lack of relevance of the 'modern' education system to rural populations and highlights the local manipulations necessary to succeed within such a system. The evidence from my field site in Dadagaun, which I will present over the course of this thesis, demonstrates that the problems he identified remain as relevant as ever.

Laura Ahearn's ethnography in Junigau in Western Nepal from 1982 onwards leads her to argue that schooling and literacy are not unidimensional but rather a set of lived experiences that will differ from community to community (2004: 7).²⁹ She used love letters exchanged by newly-literate young people as a way to understand changing notions of

²⁹ These findings are consistent with Froerer's (2011) argument that education should be understood as a social institution and builds on Street's (1984) understanding of the contextual meaning of literacy.

personhood, intimacy, and the construction of the modern educated person. She argues that new structures of feeling can be detected in the texts and in the reading practices of the villagers that emphasize the right of the individual to act according to his or her own wishes. However, while new ideas link love with development, economic success, nationalism, and individual rights, old ideas about unequal gender and age relations are still reinforced. For example, female literacy rate increases in the 1990s made it possible for the emergence of new courtship practices and facilitated self-initiated marriages, but it also reinforced certain gender ideologies and undercut some avenues to social power, especially for women. Ahearn's findings and observation thus guide this thesis to take a nuanced approach to understanding formal schooling, where students can gain key skills that empower them but these outcomes are contextual rather than pre-determined.

The expansion of opportunities for formal schooling in Junigau in the last few decades provides an instructive glimpse of wider patterns in education in rural Nepal. Ahearn has continued her engagement with the same village informally for over thirty years now. She noted:

There were no private schools at all in Junigau when I was first there in the 1980s. In 1997, however, villagers opened up a private English-medium school for the youngest grades. (I think it offered "Upper KG," "Lower KG," Class 1, and Class 2.) This school was immediately extremely popular in the village, as the government school was going through a difficult period. The teachers were local Magars (many of whom had been my former students when I was a Peace Corps teacher), and the fees were not high. As of my last visit to the village in 2010, this school was still in existence. I had expected it to expand, but it remained small and focused on the first few years. (Ahearn, personal communication, 11/07/2014)

Ahearn's observations thus demonstrate how private schools have used the opportunity provided by the failure of public schools to penetrate even rural areas in recent years. She noted that most of the teachers at the public school had been Bahun/Chhetri, whereas all the teachers at the private school were local Magars, which was attractive to the predominantly Magar population in the village. Most families who can afford the fees at the private school send their children there, whereas those who cannot afford the private school remain at the public school. The private school has not expanded to provide secondary education, so students from well-off families who can afford to migrate usually move to private schools in Tansen city, whereas the rest return to the public school. It appears that the public school has not been able to do well either, as it was burnt down by some disgruntled

students because they had not passed their final exams a few years ago.³⁰ This incident demonstrates the need to pay close attention to exam results, particularly because of the threat of violence tied to the frustration of those who fail. The emergence of the private school illustrates how differentiation can take place through the bifurcation of the education system in the village.

Jennifer Rothchild's (2006) ethnographic research on gender and schooling in Jiri confirms how education outcomes can be complex. The education landscape had evolved significantly by the time she carried out her research, with the rise of private schools and increase in education mobility and academic competition by the 2000s, even in many rural areas. She argues that the "notion of gender influenced students' ability to attend, participate in, and succeed in school" (ibid.: 96). The school was not a neutral venue but a value-laden institution that reflected many of society's biases at large. Even teachers, including headmasters, had gendered notions that they projected on their expectations from students. These notions also determined what students were expected to study. Schools were thus actively reproducing cultural norms through the education they provided. The expectation that education would inevitably lead to upward mobility has to thus be tempered in the context within which the school system exists, since school outcomes are not predetermined but depend on the level, quality, and relevance of the education system to the wider political economy in the region. At the same time, Rothchild also shows that gendered notions were being pushed by the girls who were in school: these "trouble makers" challenged norms to help change society. Their education empowered them by providing the tools they could use to challenge the status quo, even if schools perpetuated existing gender norms at the same time. The dual role of education that could empower but also reproduce existing norms was thus obvious in Jiri.

Taken together, then, the findings of Ragsdale, Ahearn, and Rothchild allow us to locate some of the underlying challenges in formal education in Nepal, where it is extremely difficult to plan a national system to meet national modernization and progress goals in the context of a post-feudal, highly differentiated, and still hierarchical society. The outcomes of formal schooling cannot always be pre-determined, and so in this thesis I analyze both the intended and unintended outcomes for men and women alike.

³⁰ The school has since been rebuilt with funding from the government as well as the support of wealthy ex-villagers (former Gurkha soldiers or those who migrated to Kathmandu and elsewhere).

IV. Education Differentiation in Nepal

This brief history of the role and relevance of education demonstrates how formal schooling has been understood in Nepal. The elite have been able to consolidate their position through education and the status and benefits afforded to the educated have contributed significantly to increase the general populace's expectations. The history of tiered structure of education—one for the elite and another for the masses—has consolidated the possibility for differentiation through formal schooling.

Private schools were under the purview of the government in Nepal until 1980, and so were limited for a while. However, the Education Act of 1980 allowed for the operation of private schools more freely, and their liberal spread in the early and mid-1990s has led to rampant fees and variable quality alongside a rapid loss of confidence in public schools (Carney and Bista 2009, Graner 2006). The decline of public education in Nepal in recent years has created further space for private schools (Carney and Bista 2009: 196). The perception of education quality associated with private schools, primarily because of their use of English language as the medium of instruction, has fuelled even poor people's expectations to join the ranks of 'middle-class' through upward mobility.

English is the preferred language of instruction in most if not all private schools in Nepal because it is considered necessary to make cross-cultural linkages with the international community, regardless of the proficiency with which both teachers and students use the language (Caddell 2006). The mastery of English language thus affords a key cultural capital to English-medium school students, differentiating them from most public school students who do not learn in English. Private schools emphasize the alleged cosmopolitan nature of teaching (Liechty 2003) and boast of international curricula and examinations. The interplay between (English) language and aspirations to engage with modernity is central to the assumption of English-medium private schools as quality education institutions (Caddell 2007, 2007a). Mastery of English allows people to seek better jobs both at home and abroad, given the prominent place English enjoys as an international language. This prominence sometimes means that language is misunderstood to represent knowledge. The illiteracy of the parent generation prevents them from engaging with what their children learn, but the expectation of better education quality through the alleged mastery of language as well as the belief that private school enrolment signifies social status are enough to persuade even poor families to make tremendous sacrifices to pay for private schools. The quality of learning in

general or English in particular does not even have to be of better standard than public schools, but the perception of quality alone can be enough. In fact, I show in this thesis that local private schools (with the exception of a few elite private schools) are able to sustain themselves precisely because of the vast number of under- or unemployed educated youth who cannot get what they consider good jobs, so they are willing to teach for minimal pay, which is usually much less than what teachers in the public sector receive.³¹ The very graduates who are unable to secure gainful employment thus play a central role in reproducing a bifurcated system.³² The differentiation is then no longer strictly between the educated and non-educated but also within the educated.

The official distinction between public and private schools is determined by whether they receive official funding from the Nepali government. The Ministry of Education distinguishes between aided community schools and unaided community schools, which are both public schools but the former receive regular funding for salaries and administrative costs whereas the latter do not receive such regular funding and so rely on community support and donations. Private schools, however, are considered institutional schools that do not receive regular funding from the government. The rise of private schools can be demonstrated by the fact that total enrolment in private school share of the student population rose from 10.8% in 2004 to 14.5% in 2011 (DOE 2012). There are 29,063 public schools and 5,298 private schools that have registered with the Ministry of Education by 2012. The disparity between private and public school outcomes can be demonstrated by analyzing the SLC results for 10th grade students, which are considered the most significant markers of success for both individual students and schools.³³ According to a Ministry of Education analysis, the national failure rate in the SLC was about 55% on average between 1994 and 2004, with most failures occurring among students from socially and economically disadvantaged communities studying in public schools in rural areas (Bhatta 2005). Almost 80% of students taking the SLC attend public schools but the pass percentage for public schools is only 38%, compared to the high pass rate of 85% for private schools (Bhatta 2004). Private schools account for about 80% of the students that secure first division in the SLC,

³¹ Only a handful of elite private schools are able to – or make a policy of – paying more than the government rate.

³² Similar trends of young, under-employed graduates providing the bulk of the teaching force in private schools are being observed around the world. For instance, Andrabi et al. (2008) argue that there are huge disparities in private and public school teacher salaries in Pakistan. Private school teachers are more likely to be young, unmarried, less educated, and far less likely to have received any pre-service or in-service teacher training (ibid.: 344).

³³ I will discuss the role of the SLC further in chapter six.

even though only 12% of the nation's 10th grade students attend these schools (Graner 2006). Private schools scored, on average, 39% higher marks than public schools (Bhatta 2004: 11). Although major disparities have been observed in the results based on gender and geography, the public-private achievement divide is the most pronounced.³⁴

The rise of private schools actively undermines the public school system, further differentiating between the two. When people are no longer confident about government education, anyone and everyone who comes close to affording private education for their children does so. When parents from a relatively privileged background withdraw their children from government schools to put them in private schools, there is even less parental pressure to improve government schools (PROBE 1999). The perception that private schools are better managed, boast less teacher absenteeism, and provide more hours of instruction make them attractive to parents who can afford them (Srivastava and Walford 2007). Private-school enrolment also confers a sense of higher status to enrolled children and their families. Most of the students left behind in government schools cannot afford private schools, and most of the teachers left behind do not have impressive credentials to secure lucrative employment opportunities in elite private schools. The implications of this nexus are dangerous. If public education is second-rate, and all those who can flee the public school system do so, the expansion of alternative schooling facilities involves a real danger of diluting the right of underprivileged children to quality education. While these facilities might help them in the short term, this might be done at the risk of perpetuating the deep inequities of the schooling system, whereby children of different social backgrounds have vastly different educational opportunities (Froerer 2011, IHDS 2010, Jeffrey et al. 2008).³⁵ The difference in education quality thus influences not just immediate schooling outcomes but also future opportunities, confirming its role as a tool for differentiation.

a. Public education for the marginalized: the case of Bhumi

Under these circumstances, the performance of Bhumi, a public community school in the outskirts of Lalitpur, allows us the opportunity to understand the context within which the school has been able to succeed.³⁶ I use the theory of positive deviance to understand the unique marriage between positive and deviant practices that allows for the school's success,

³⁴ For a more detailed review of SLC results, refer to Bhatta (2005, 2004), Graner (2006, 1998), and Thapa (2012,2011)

³⁵ This section draws primarily from literature on education in India but the findings are consistent with the Nepali case.

³⁶ I present an overview of the school and the communities it serves in the Methodology chapter, and discuss this success as well as its implications in the subsequent empirical chapters in this thesis.

and the outcome has been the overwhelming rejection of local private schools in the region. It is important to explain the immediate success of this public school for two main reasons. First, that this school is perceived to be successful challenges regional and international trends of the continuing decline of the public school system. A close analysis of the school's success allows us to identify not just why this school is outperforming others but also provides some answers to the approach required to address the continuing structural problems within the public school system. While the unique circumstances that have emerged in Bhumi cannot be replicated uncritically, these findings certainly indicate the need for a wider debate on the two-tiered private/public education divide. Second, these results do not signal the end but rather the beginning of the analysis on the quality and relevance of education. That these public school students succeed despite the odds allows them a further degree of credentialing that sets them apart from a vast majority of other public school graduates in the region and the nation, given the high rate of failure among these students. However, an investigation of their future trajectories after secondary education demonstrates the short half-life of this success, and raises more questions about how the outcome of the analysis of education is intimately tied to the scope of the analysis. I investigate whether the transient achievements of graduates within a successful public school translate into long-term gains for them and explain why they fail to remain competitive in higher education and employment. Such an approach raises further questions about the relevance of formal schooling within the broader socio-cultural and political-economic contexts. The overwhelming experience of public-school graduates—and most of them are from marginalized communities—in recent years has been of frustration, failure, and disappointment (Jeffrey 2010, Jeffrey et al. 2008, Katz 2004). Bhumi graduates, despite their success at the level of the SLC, appear to be no different.

Karen Valentin's (2012) work among the urban poor living in squatter communities in Kathmandu has shown that although caste and class were supposed to be the main enemies to be fought through education, the reality is that children from high-caste and upper-class backgrounds are the ones who are increasingly catered to by the system. I use a broader definition of marginality to include the intersection of poverty, class, caste, and geography in this thesis. Over the course of the five empirical chapters, I describe the socio-economic status of my respondents and examine how the interactions between caste, class, and geography were not static but dynamic and evolving.

In order to understand these dynamic processes in Nepal, I evaluate the role of foreign migration in providing opportunities and outlets for young men, and the subsequent impact on schooling aspirations and experiences. Migration is not guaranteed to lead to positive outcomes, as migrants often rely on high interest loans to secure these jobs, face numerous challenges in adjusting to living in foreign countries, and tolerate harsh, often fatal, conditions in carrying out their work (Bruslé 2009; Booth and Pattisson 2014, 2014a, 2014b; Pattisson 2014, 2014a, 2013). However, the growing frustration at home can still glorify temporary exit as a way out, and these experiences help people gain experience and become party to new forms of international networks.³⁷ Migration can thus appear attractive for both push and pull reasons, with it serving as a source of opportunity that provides both social and economic benefits (KC 2014, Punch 2007). In Nepal, it is estimated that more than four million migrants are abroad and that nearly half of all households either have at least one migrant in a foreign country or someone who has returned after working abroad (Sharma et al. 2014: 32). In the last decade, almost 80% of international migrants from Nepal left the country in search of work, and 88% of them were male. Their newfound socio-cultural capital through mobility can make it possible for migrants to aspire to better livelihoods at home and abroad beyond their educational pathways. Foreign migration is also providing an important outlet for people's frustrations at home, as young men (and some women) leave the country in search of employment.

V. Conclusion

Nepal has had a long history of being structured as a hierarchical society, and education has played a particular role within that context. Historically, the Ranas consolidated education's role as a socializing institution by limiting its access to the masses. This restriction meant that those with even a few years of schooling could secure lucrative jobs, both because they had academic credentials and because those credentials served as markers of their elite status. Alongside the rapid political changes taking place in the country over the last six decades, numerous educational experiments have taken place at the national level with mixed success. The recognition of the disparity in education access between different groups has led to increased official efforts to facilitate opportunities for the poor and the marginalized. However, the rapid expansion of the private school sector and the

³⁷ Samantha Punch (2007) has similarly documented that migration rather than education leads to increased status for returnees in the rural Bolivian context. While pursuing secondary education is no longer seen as productive because of the lack of meaningful employment opportunities, migration is providing young people with alternative transitions through various social and economic benefits.

subsequent decline of the public school system have facilitated the continued significance of education as a tool for differentiation, with poor people at the wrong side of the differentiation spectrum.

4. 'Halfie' Goes 'Home': A Note on Methodology

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I introduce my research sites and explain my methodological choices for the thesis. I explain here the evolution of the research and introduce the school and the village where I conducted the core of my research (section two). I provide an overview of the data that informs and shapes the thesis that follows, and the context within which it was collected. I then describe the research methodology in detail, explaining how each method relates to this thesis (section three). Next, I elaborate on my positionality, reflexivity, and ethical considerations (section four). I also highlight the difficulty of separating research and activism in this section. I conclude by highlighting some of the limitations of this research and outlining the potential for future research to bolster these findings (section five).

Development theory has shifted strongly in favour of participatory methods and the emphasis is on giving voice to people (Shivakumar 2005; Chambers 1997, 1983; Uphoff 1992). Those researched are not passive objects upon whom development acts but agents who make particular choices given the constraints and opportunities they face (Scott 1998, Ferguson 1990). The participatory approach allows them to understand and guide the research process as partners rather than subjects. However, sceptics remain, particularly because 'participation' can be manipulated by development actors (Mosse 2005, 2004; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Rossi 2004). As such, I combined well-established research methods with some innovative approaches to investigate various issues in the field.

II. Research Evolution

This research grew out of my previous work with the Chepangs, a highly marginalized indigenous community, in central Nepal (Karki 2011). I argued there that education can be a poisoned chalice in the Chepang context because it raises people's hopes and aspirations without providing them the necessary skills or knowledge to realize those outcomes. My research focused primarily on school children, so I had to rely on calculated estimates to predict future outcomes for school graduates. The Chepangs expected education to lead to employment, but the quality of the education they received was so low that they acquired neither the credentials nor the skills to get jobs that would meet their aspirations.

This doctoral research sought to build further on my previous work. My Chepang research had been carried out in an ethnically homogeneous village, so my recommendations

had to be limited primarily to these communities: since my unit of analysis had been ethnicity, by definition my conclusions were also about ethnicity. As such, I wanted to ensure that this research would be carried out in an ethnically heterogeneous community. I wanted to extend my inquiry further to look at the implications of formal schooling on employment opportunities and life trajectories, so I also sought to identify field sites with some proximity to employment centres. The Chepang village had been seven hours' walk from the nearest vehicular transportation, so their access to employment had been restricted to the village alone.

This evolution of ideas guided me to first consider a comparative study between the Chepangs and a more heterogeneous community. Since employment opportunities were scarce for Chepangs in their village, I spent the first three months of 2012 in Kathmandu, using my contacts to trace and interview about fifty Chepangs who had migrated to the capital. This research helped me build on the employment situation and map out various life trajectories for Chepangs. I spent the rest of the year carrying out the second phase of my research in a heterogeneous community (see below), but during the analysis phase, I had to make the difficult decision to not directly use my recent work with the Chepangs in this thesis. My research interests and design were deeply shaped by this work, but pursuing a comparative element introduced numerous variables that could obscure rather than illustrate the relationship between education and employment and its impact on poor and marginalized communities. The key findings of this thesis would not have changed if I had included this work, as the Chepang research would have provided more examples to bolster the arguments here. I will draw on some of these Chepang findings in this thesis, but the core of the thesis is based on the research I carried out in Dadagaun and Bhumi.

a. Finding Bhumi

I spent many hours in early 2012 to identify the site for this research. I spoke to numerous individuals and organizations working with schools in and around Kathmandu. One of my contact organizations, Shanti Education Initiative Nepal (SEIN), had been working with public schools in the outskirts of Kathmandu valley, providing infrastructural support and teacher trainings to improve school outcomes. I accompanied SEIN in their school visits, and after these visits Bhumi appeared as the obvious site for my research.

Bhumi School is a public community school that serves a diverse population in Lalitpur district. The school caters to about nine surrounding communities who live within

walking distance (about thirty minutes) from the school. The ethnic groups represented include Dalits, Magars, Tamangs, Newars, Chhetris, and Bahuns, so the school is a microcosm of Nepal in terms of ethnic representation. Most, if not all, students come from very poor families who often struggle to make ends meet, and the school has to intervene regularly to provide basic utilities such as stationery and snacks for the students.³⁸

I met with the school administration and they agreed to allow me to be based at the school for my research. I made it clear to them that I had no official relationship with SEIN, and would be based there solely as a researcher. I wanted to establish an honest relationship from the very beginning, and so discussed the purpose of the research in detail with the Principal and the teachers. I offered to provide them feedback based on my findings at the end of the project, and they agreed to extend their full support.

The first help Bhumi provided me was to recommend a place for me to live. I had not spent much time in the area before, so I wanted to rely on the locals to identify where I should be based for the duration of the research. Since the school caters to nine communities, there were numerous village communities where I could have lived. However, when I explained my research to them, the teachers recommended that I live in Dadagaun, a village forty minutes' uphill walk from the school. One of the teachers walked with me to the village on top of a hill, and he discussed the arrangements for my accommodation at a villager's house. I lived there for the rest of 2012.

b. Dadagaun

Many Dadagaun residents refer to their village as the undiscovered Nagarkot.³⁹ Dadagaun is on top of one of the surrounding Lalitpur hills in the outskirts of Kathmandu valley. Most of the village is spread across a long stretch of relatively flat land on top of a hill (see below). The high vantage point affords the few visitors that venture here with a wonderful view of the capital city.

³⁸ The school will be described and discussed in greater detail in chapter five.

³⁹ Nagarkot is a popular hill resort station in the outskirts of Kathmandu valley.

Figure 2 A view of the village



The geographical proximity of Dadagaun to the centre betrays its rural, inaccessible reality. Residents still have to walk up to an hour to get to public vehicular transportation, with the commute to Kathmandu valley taking up to three hours. The village is not connected to the capital with proper roads yet, with only 150 metre (a small fraction of the total distance to the city) of the way paved, in 2012. The state has not been able to integrate the village within its water supply network, and so the residents have had to develop their own collection mechanism to secure their water supply through fifteen interspersed public taps in the village. Although the village has been electrified, it is not immune to the national regime of *loadshedding*, the local term for Nepal Electricity Authority's regulated blackouts that last for up to 18 hours a day during the dry season.

The main reason Bhumi teachers recommended Dadagaun for my research was because of its composition. The village comprises of 81 households, which can be divided into four key groups: Magars, Tamangs, Newars, and Chhetris. Chhetris are considered to be 'high-caste' while Magars, Tamangs and Newars are categorized as 'indigenous nationalities', although they are considered to be at different 'developmental stages' according to the national categorization of indigenous communities. Newars are considered to be advanced, Magars are identified as a disadvantaged group, and Tamangs are categorized as a marginalized group (see Gellner 2007: 1826 for details). The Newars are themselves

subdivided into about 20 castes, two of whom are represented in Dadagaun by ten Shrestha families and seven Nagarkoti families.

Table 2 Ethnic groups in the village

Ethnicity	Number of households	Number of Individuals	Family size
Tamang	24	115	4.8
Magar	18	85	4.7
Chhetri	22	100	4.5
Newar	17	81	4.8
Total	81	381	4.7

The table shows that the four ethnic groups were represented fairly equally in the village, with their composition ranging from 21% to 27% of the total population. The average family size was also consistent across these ethnic groups.

I did not select the village for its composition of these specific ethnic groups, but because of the broad ethnic diversity of the population. This heterogeneity has allowed me to compare and contrast schooling and employment outcomes for various caste and ethnic groups in the village. There were two key groups who were not represented in my sample, the second of which holds particular significance. There is a prominent temple of a Hindu god on the same hill as the village, and since Dadagaun was on top of the hill, it was considered to be over the head of the deity's home. As such, Bahuns and Dalits, allegedly the highest and lowest groups in the caste system, did not live in Dadagaun, as local customs declared their residence over the god's head as impious. Given the prominent position Bahuns enjoy in the caste hierarchy in Nepal, it would have been helpful to have some Bahuns in the village. The omission of Dalits is particularly unfortunate, given the bleak record for Dalits across all measures of poverty, inequality, education, and employment levels. The analysis of the public community school addresses the exclusion of Bahuns and Dalits partially, as it serves students from these communities from the region, but the specific nuance of village life cannot be addressed as fully for these caste groups in this thesis.

All Dadagaun villagers rely on some farming to make a living. As the village is on top of a hill, the land they own is not always easy to till, and they often face serious irrigation problems during the dry season. However, all families in Dadagaun have traditionally owned

at least some land,⁴⁰ and they grow various food crops such as rice and maize as well as cash crops and vegetables. Similarly, most families also raise livestock in the form of goats and chicken to supplement their income. Although some boys, especially young sons, help out, the vast majority of this agricultural work is carried out by women.⁴¹ The most labour-intensive agricultural work is carried out during planting and harvesting seasons, and the village relies on a system of shared labour called *mela*. On any given day, a few families will host their *mela*, and other participating households are expected to provide at least one family member to the *mela*. The host provides snacks and meals during work hours, and sometimes they also provide alcohol at the end of the work shift. The system works on reciprocity, and families continue to send workers to each other's farms over subsequent days. The arrangement is informal but the norms of reciprocity and food compensation are closely observed. Sometimes there are imbalances to these norms, as not all families can always reciprocate by working in the fields for everyone who worked for them. Similarly, families that own small plots of land only require a few workers to work on their fields but they are often also more readily available to work for others, as their smallholding is not enough to feed their families. In such cases, other transactions based on cash or kind (crops) take place, but these are rare.⁴²

There were a few employment opportunities in the village in addition to agriculture (working as a carpenter, tailor, or wage labourer). There are nine 'multi-purpose' grocery shops operated by locals in Dadagaun. These shops sell everything from tea and matches to school stationery, rice, and liquor. These businesses are genuinely family enterprises, as both husband and wife are actively involved in these operations at all but one shop in the village. Further, many people also travel daily to Kathmandu for day jobs, particularly in the service industry. The relative proximity of the village to the capital city meant that villagers could commute daily to pursue higher education and employment opportunities. All secondary school graduates who continued with their schooling travelled to Kathmandu valley for further education. In total, 29 people—all men—owned motorcycles in the village, which

⁴⁰ Many families have sold at least parts of their land in recent years, with a few families having sold all their family land.

⁴¹ I will discuss the role of women in agriculture, as well as wider employment trends, in greater detail in chapter eight.

⁴² These arrangements for shared labour are quite common in subsistence farming in rural Nepal. For instance, Gérard Toffin (1986: 86) has described a similar arrangement of reciprocal assistance among Western Tamangs. In its more organized but still informal form, this arrangement is recognized in the form of labour-gangs, "which are based on shift-work and mutual help, are formed primarily to achieve soil cultivation works, even when they perform other activities sometimes such as cutting and carrying of wood (for housing and cooking)." Similarly, Hiroshi Ishii (1980: 170) has documented three types of labour recruitment among the Newars, one of which is *bola*, which is similar to *mela* and involves reciprocal labour exchange.

significantly reduced their commute time, whereas the rest had first to walk and then take public transport to reach their destination. Nonetheless, the relative proximity of the village to the capital city made it possible for them to pursue various opportunities that would not be available to people from more rural villages in the country.

The village itself was undergoing some rapid transformation while I was there for my research. First, the sale of ancestral land in Dadagaun has led to a large influx of cash into the village. At least 50 households in Dadagaun, or about 60% of the households in the village, have sold some land in recent years, bringing in a lot of new money into the village. Second, more young men are going abroad for employment, so there is a greater flow of remittance money. In total, thirty-five men have gone abroad for work in the last decade, with fifteen men currently employed abroad. Fourteen of those men work in the Middle East (mostly in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates), while one worker has been employed in Korea. The effects of these recent trends are visible in the village, as it is easy to distinguish the families who have sold land and/or sent a family member abroad, as their houses are usually more ‘modern’ and made of bricks and cement instead of traditional mud or stone houses (see figure 13). Third, the village has been able to pursue an infrastructure development programme. For instance, they are in the initial stages of building a tarmac road to the village, and their convenient location on top of a hill has also attracted investment into wireless and telecommunication tower hubs. Fourth, religious conversions to Christianity have been on the rise in recent years in Dadagaun, with over 30% of the population now identifying as Christians.⁴³ These changes are analyzed to varying degrees within this thesis over the course of the discussion on education and employment, but it is clear that the village itself is not static either.

c. Data Collection

The combination of Dadagaun and Bhumi provided me the perfect opportunity to study the linkages between education and employment, particularly as they affect the life trajectories of people from poor and marginalized communities. I lived with a Magar family

⁴³ Conversions to Christianity are beyond the scope of this thesis, but this issue has been the focus of a number of studies. For instance, refer to Sharma (2001), Fricke (2008), and Ripert (2014) for some of these discussions. I did check to make sure that neither religion nor religious conversion lead to any significant change to education and employment outcomes. The most common trajectory for conversion is as follows: a villager would report being seriously ill but doctors could not diagnose them, after which they would be healed through prayer, providing the motivation for them and those around them to convert to Christianity. In Dadagaun, people from all four ethnic groups have converted to Christianity, although the rate is slightly higher among Tamangs and Magars than Chhetris and Newars. I will describe a particular story concerning conversion, as well as some implications for social relations, in the penultimate chapter of this thesis.

in the village for eight months in 2012, and commuted daily to Bhumi with the local children. I conducted the research using participant observation as a key method, and triangulated my findings through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, a community-led household survey, and ‘learning by teaching’.⁴⁴ I was committed to using participatory research methods because they allow respondents to take greater ownership of the research data by playing a central role in generating that information. I kept a detailed daily diary where I recorded all my findings and my thoughts, and prepared monthly reports to digest and analyze various developments along the way.

I interviewed 46 Dadagaun villagers, 16 recent SLC graduates, 13 Bhumi teachers, and 69 Bhumi students over the course of 2012. These semi-structured interviews represented a formal avenue to collect information from various stakeholders, but being there and appreciating the context facilitated a more comprehensive interpretation of the findings. I intentionally conducted most of these interviews in the last few months of 2012, after I had established strong relationships in the village and the school. Such an approach not only allowed me to understand the wider socio-cultural and political-economic contexts but also gave my respondents the opportunity to get to know me personally and understand my research interests. When I got informed consent from my respondents to use their life stories and their pictures for my research, then, that act was not just an event (during the interview) but also a process that demonstrated our mutual trust and respect for each other.

I walked a fine line between being a ‘teacher’ and a ‘researcher’ at both Dadagaun and Bhumi, and I reflect on this dimension throughout this chapter and indeed the thesis. I wanted to give back to the community and the school for allowing me to be a ‘busybody’ for so long in their lives, but I had also discovered that teaching allowed me to not only investigate but also be a participant observer to experience the education system. My daily commutes to the school with the children helped me understand numerous issues associated with schooling, employment, livelihoods, and their work-school balance. At Bhumi, my sustained residence in Dadagaun and adherence to the school schedule demonstrated that I was deeply invested in the research and also wanted to help the school when possible. I believe this engagement convinced the school staff further to be frank about their experiences and share sensitive information with me.

⁴⁴ I will discuss each of these methods in turn in detail in the next section.

I sought to use participatory research methods because I wanted this research to be a shared experience whenever possible. Such an approach would also ultimately strengthen the research, because I have learned through my previous work that letting your respondents guide the direction often leads to unexpected but fruitful outcomes. When I was trying to understand the composition of the village, then, instead of relying on a traditional survey model where the researcher fills out demographic details for each household, I brought together a group of villagers to discuss these details. Some recent SLC graduates agreed to help map the village, and we spent three weeks drawing each house, road, tap and public space of significance in the village. This information then led to a discussion about other important details about the village, which I explored further to sketch out a village census.

Taken together, the multi-method approach helped me compare, contrast, and critique my findings to bolster the thesis. In the next section, I will further elaborate on each method I pursued, and how that approach relates to the thesis.

III. Research Methods

a. Participant Observation and Ethnographic Fieldwork

Since I was interested in looking at young people's trajectories based on the relationship between education and employment, I wanted to get a complete picture of their life experiences, including how they spent their time beyond school and work. Such an approach provided a better understanding of their present circumstances based on their past experiences and future aspirations, as I was committed to look at people and events "in a total milieu rather than only at bits and pieces" (Wolcott 1975: 111).

This approach allowed me a unique window not just to address the research questions but to participate in a way of life which, in turn, also facilitated a more comprehensive analysis of the same research concerns. The Magar family with whom I lived throughout my fieldwork was my most immediate sounding board, so I was fortunate to live with a family whose composition complemented my research interests. The father of the family works as a driver for an international organization, so commutes to Kathmandu on a daily basis. His wife is responsible for household chores as well as agricultural work. They raise a few chicken and goats for some supplemental income, not unlike many other villagers in Dadagaun. The family has three children, whom I got to know well during my stay. The eldest daughter is pursuing a Bachelor's degree at a public university in Kathmandu, although she does not attend classes on a daily basis. The middle son had appeared for his SLC exam when I

arrived, and worked as a waiter in Kathmandu while he waited for his results. After the exam results were published over the summer, he moved back home but commutes daily to attend his higher secondary school in the city. The youngest son was in 8th grade at the time, but he switched from a local private school to Bhumi that year.

My daily routine provides a window to my methodological approach for this research. Village life starts early, around about 5 a.m. The men mostly congregate around the numerous tea shops and discuss various issues of relevance to their everyday lives. I joined them in these daily ‘meetings’, and these interactions were crucial in bonding with villagers as well as providing me key insights into their lives. Although I did not engineer these conversations to gear towards my research interests, if relevant topics emerged naturally, I sometimes used the opportunity to ask questions to further understand village dynamics. The gendered aspect of village life is also most apparent in the mornings, as women are busy with cooking and other household work. Children are expected to bring water from public taps and help with the chores.

After returning home from the village, I would get ready to go to school. Lunch is served very early in Dadagaun, often before 9 a.m., as people prepare to go to school or work. A number of school children would come by the house where I stayed, and we would often walk together to Bhumi. The walk to the school is entirely downhill, so it is easier to get there, but during the rainy season the slopes are extremely slippery. Every time I slipped, the children roared in delight, and so my inability to navigate this terrain in the early days brought me closer to them. As they shared their lives with me, I got to understand the everyday experiences of school-age children (between 5 and 18 years old) in Dadagaun from their perspective.

When I first reached the school, I would say hello to the students preparing for the morning assembly. I would head for the multi-purpose teacher’s room and greet the teachers.⁴⁵ After the school assembly, if I were not required to teach,⁴⁶ I would hang out in the teacher’s room, talking to the teachers or working on my notes. The time I spent in this room doing ‘nothing’ bolstered my relationship with the school staff, and also granted me full access to the school’s activities. The more sensitive findings in this thesis would not have been possible had I not been privy to the school’s secrets that would never be revealed to

⁴⁵ I would be expected to shake hands with the male teachers but I had to hold my hands together to greet Namaste to the female teachers.

⁴⁶ I explain my teaching commitment and its implications in a later section in the chapter.

those considered to be outsiders. I spent time with the students during their breaks, but I took my afternoon snacks with the teachers. We would eat at the local tea shop, and I made sure to save at least some time during the afternoon break to interact with students.

Once the school day was over, I would walk back to the village. The steep uphill walk home provided a wonderful opportunity to recap the day's events with the students, and they enjoyed asking me questions (everything from my life to their dreams) and expected me to humour them. These bonding experiences helped me build relationships with the children that went beyond my 'teacher' identity at the school. When I got home, I would freshen up and then venture out to the village. A lot of school children and young people play football or other sports in the small field on the hill. As people return from the fields or from working in the capital, they meet again in the tea shops. The elderly, who are not to be seen in the mornings, also frequent the village shops in the afternoon. The range of conversations is very diverse, but active participation in village life on a daily basis helped me situate my research in the local context. Conveniently, a number of tea shops turn into drinking clubs in the late evenings, with men dominating alcohol consumption in public spaces. These inebriated interactions sometimes led to raised voices and minor scuffles—never directed at me—but also provided interesting perspectives as people lost their inhibitions in the dark, perhaps because of the drink.

The crowds, barring the sizeable number of men still drinking, would slowly disperse as dusk set in. The drinking stalls facilitated the most rousing conversations, and although I often wanted to stay (as a non-participant observer in this context) longer, my host family would be worried if I stayed out late, so I would dutifully return home. Once again, the division of labour within the household would be evident almost every day, with the host mother and her daughter responsible for the bulk of the work to prepare our evening meal. I offered to help with the cooking several times, but they appeared to be paralyzed with embarrassment, so I would only sit with them and talk about various issues. The students in the household often sought my help with their school work, and I was happy to be of some use. The father would come home late from work, and we usually ate together upon his return. Some evenings, if the chronic power cuts were not a hindrance, we watched movies on my computer (as the family did not own one), but they usually retired early after a long day's work. I used the evenings to reflect on the day's work and write my notes. The village itself would be eerily quiet by 10 p.m., punctuated only by late night landings at the nearby Tribhuvan International Airport in the valley below us.

This embedded approach of research helped build close relationships with various stakeholders at both Bhumi and Dadagaun. Although it would be presumptuous and inaccurate to say that I became ‘one of them’, the time I spent there ensured that my continual presence became normal to them. I attended the monthly *guthi* meetings called to discuss village affairs, which I will discuss below, and I was invited to the sporadic meetings held by Paropakar Samaj, a local club formed to develop the village as a tourist destination and safeguard village interests. In the first month of my fieldwork, there was a death in the village under mysterious circumstances, and I joined the villagers to walk three hours in scorching heat to file a complaint at the central police station.⁴⁷ Although my decision was a reaction to the situation, Dadagaun residents were happy that I accompanied them. The whole village was involved with the case, and my presence amongst them made it easier for them to accept me in their community.

The importance of situated research became even clearer to me when a couple of Dutch professors (who were also a couple) came to Bhumi to carry out a ‘rapid assessment’ research project on mass hysteria in September 2012. On the surface, their research design was excellent but their project faced serious time constraints from the start, especially for such a sensitive topic. The team was only there for five working days, and they expected to carry out a comprehensive study of three schools. When the researchers sought to carry out communal consultations in Dadagaun, villagers were defiant about their methods and many refused to participate. One villager told me that such a project would only help them, the professors, but not the participants because they just came, would do their research super-fast, and then leave. The professors had been careful in designing their research and provided a small gift hamper of essentials such as soap and stationery for their participants, but the villagers felt these did not address their larger concerns. I was careful to explain both during and after their visit that my research was entirely independent of their project, and that I was not associated with them in any way, as I did not want to compromise my own position in the village because of their work.

This method of research posed some gaping questions by its very design. If we were to turn the research gaze inwards, if relative strangers were to approach us, the researchers,

⁴⁷ After careful consideration, I have decided not to include the details of the controversial passing away of a villager during my time in Dadagaun. While the case would powerfully demonstrate various village dynamics that would further strengthen this thesis, I feel that discussing this case publicly now would be a grave invasion of the privacy of the villagers concerned, especially given the sensitive nature of the situation.

and ask us to explain our deepest, darkest concerns without even getting to know us first, I doubt most of us would feel comfortable sharing these details. The rapid appraisal team came and left, but the issues they uncovered left me more convinced that a long-term, situated approach would provide a more robust and holistic picture. At the same time, this experience also helped me contextualize my research methods, and how even my ethnographic work over the course of the year could be perceived as only uncovering a tip of the iceberg, while the implications of my research questions and the evolution of the village would continue long after I had left.

b. Semi-structured interviews

I chose to use semi-structured interviews so that I could provide some structure through my questions to reflect my research interests but also ensure enough open space for the interviewees to voice their perspective.

Table 3 Overview of interviews

Interviews in Bhumi and Dadagaun	Number of Respondents
Students	69
Dadagaun villagers	46
Recent SLC graduates	16
Teachers	13
TOTAL	144

I had to be especially careful about informed consent while conducting the research in general and interviews in particular. I did not digitally record any of my interviews and did not seek written consent either, because these formal means of consent would not be common or usual in the rural Nepali context. I did not have to negotiate access because of the introduction I received, first from SEIN and then Bhumi. I chose to spend the first few months building relationships, so that I could establish myself in these contexts and ensure that the school as well as the village understood the nature and purpose of my research. When

I conducted interviews, I reiterated the details of my research and sought and received explicit oral consent for their participation. I told them that they were under no obligation to participate in the research, and could choose not to answer any particular question or end the interview at any time. I explained that I would anonymize the names and places of all non-public figures to try to protect their privacy.⁴⁸ I provided each respondent with the opportunity to ask any question to me at any time, as well as add any comments or thoughts they wished to share with me at the end of the interview. Since I was asking them numerous questions throughout the process, I felt it was only fair that they got their questions answered about me, so I entertained professional and personal questions. I had become a familiar figure by the time I interviewed various respondents, which helped me put them at ease throughout the process.

Although I tried to conduct interviews in relaxed, informal settings in private, this was not always possible. The process was less complicated in Bhumi, because I had access to a free room in a separate school building under construction near the main complex. I invited teachers, students, and SMC members, and spent between thirty minutes to two hours on each interview with them. I checked to make sure that these interviews did not clash with any of their teaching or class times. If some of the interviews took longer than intended, I chose to postpone and restart at another time rather than affect their school schedule. The process was not as easy in Dadagaun though, as that private space was not always available for interviews. As a first resort, I tried to interview people in their own homes. Since tea shops served as de facto meeting places for numerous villagers, I also coordinated with shopkeepers to use their back rooms to conduct some interviews. However, the presence of spouses, other family members, children or neighbours often meant that we had to improvise or, sometimes, conduct the interview in the presence of others. I invited close contacts back to my room to interview them in private,⁴⁹ but sometimes my host family members would also be within hearing distance. I sought explicit consent from the respondents to carry on with the interviews if we had company, and volunteered to postpone our conversations if we had to address sensitive issues that either of us felt would be best kept between ourselves. Some form of imitation and retelling of the same responses by different respondents could have been possible because it was not feasible to always conduct interviews in ideal circumstances. As such, while the expected setting of private, continuous interviews was not always

⁴⁸ I will explain the implications of this process later in the chapter.

⁴⁹ I only invited men back to my room when needed, and conducted interviews with women in their own homes or in public spaces.

possible, I tried to ensure the privacy of the respondents while being mindful of social norms regarding private and public interactions, as I discuss the particular sensitivity about working with young people of the opposite sex later in the chapter.

Although this research was primarily carried out over a year, the processes under discussion in this thesis play out over decades if not generations. As such, I used a combination of participant observation and repeated semi-structured interviews to develop ethnographic portraits of people of different ages from similar socio-economic backgrounds to understand the emerging trends and circumstances of their life trajectories. This approach follows Froerer's work on girls' education in central India, where she used a series of ethnographic portraits that were representative of the kind of situation in which most local girls find themselves, since it was not possible for her to follow a single set of girls throughout their childhood and school experiences (2012: 346).

The timing and nature of the interviews helped to triangulate the findings from the ethnographic approach of fieldwork, and provided some deep insight into how things appeared from particular points of view. The process of explaining the research, seeking explicit consent for the interview, and asking questions, however, introduced an obvious sense of formality to the proceedings, and even respondents with whom I had developed a strong personal relationship stiffened slightly during the interviews. Although I tried to put my respondents at ease, they could clearly see that I was asking them a list of questions, and so they appeared to become more 'self-conscious' about their responses. The interviews thus form a key part of the thesis, but the perspectives expressed here have also been contextualized and elaborated further through other research methods that help paint a more comprehensive picture of the issues under investigation.

c. Focus Groups

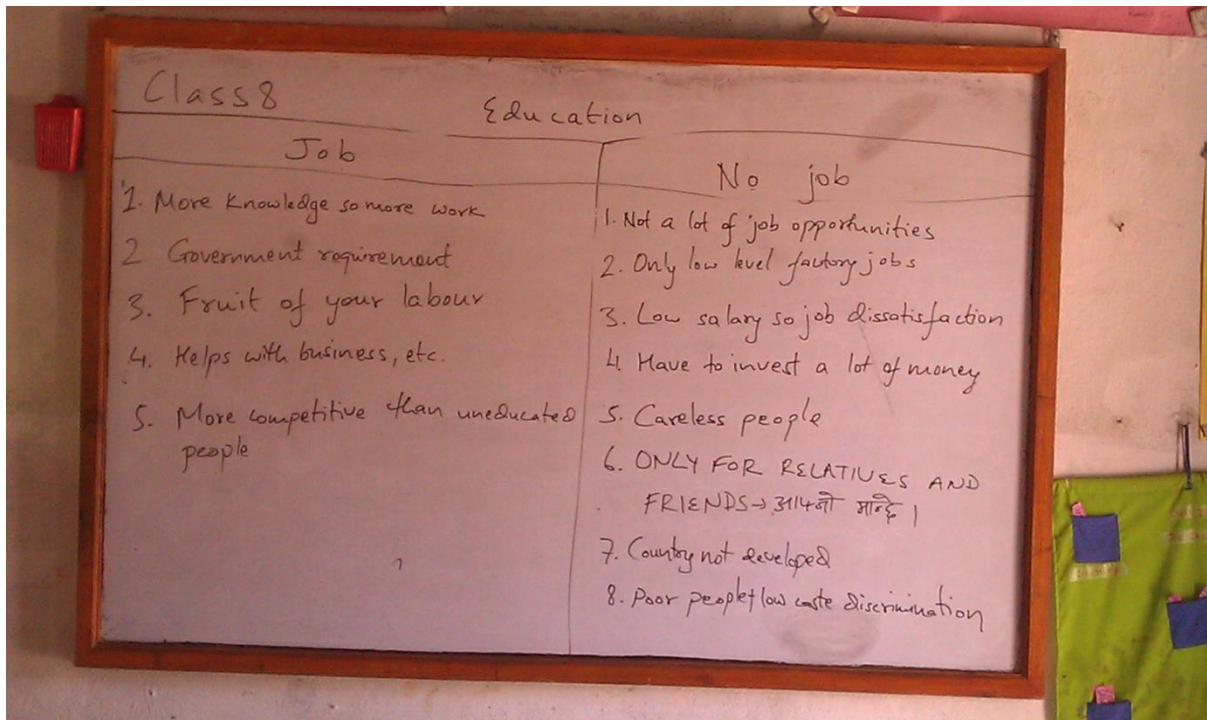
This research was concerned with the interests of a diverse group of people including parents, students, teachers, and employed and unemployed people. I hosted some meetings with focus groups to identify and better understand the position of each group. Focus groups provided an alternative avenue for research, as it allowed for issues to be discussed collectively. The opportunity for a discourse with their peers allowed for a feedback mechanism where people could respond to each other's views, providing more depth to the conversation.

While it was easy to get some of the groups together, especially those based in institutions, it was more difficult to bring others to the same place at the same time. Whenever possible, I relied on existing group structures rather than convene a separate focus group. Such an approach helped increase the number of participants in each focus group (as they were meeting for their own purposes in any case) and helped reduce the burden on respondents, as they did not have to schedule a separate time to participate in my research. If I wanted to hold a focus group after a meeting of teachers or villagers, for instance, I would first get permission from the Principal or Chair of such meetings. At the end of the scheduled meeting, I would seek further consent from the participants, and then relate some of the day's discussions to my research interests. I was aware that relying on pre-arranged meetings could bias the following group discussion for my research, but I wanted to ensure that the support they were providing me did not pose any difficulties for them. I thus used such opportunities to pose further questions about education, employment, and life trajectories, and the discussion helped shape my understanding as well as future direction of the research. The focus groups were semi-structured like the interviews, which allowed me to ask particular questions while also providing ample space to explore other avenues.

Bhumi served as a convenient site to host focus groups, separately with teachers and students. The teachers met about twice a month, and I attended these meetings.⁵⁰ The teachers sometimes explicitly sought my input, but for the most part I only observed and took notes. While these meetings themselves cannot be considered to be focus groups for my research, at the end of some of the meetings (with the prior approval of the Principal and the consent of the participating teachers) I posed various questions and used the discussion to further hone my research. One of the key shortcomings of relying on pre-arranged meetings as launching pads for my focus groups was that my meetings with teachers often suffered from a gender bias, as most female teachers did not attend these interactions after school hours because they were expected to take care of their households. I tried to compensate by consciously spending more time with a group of female teachers during their free time at school so that I could get their views as well. With students, I conducted focus groups by class group, when I was required to act as a substitute teacher to cover various absences. I acquired consent from class teachers and the Principal, and used this time to discuss my research with the students. The children were very keen to share their thoughts, and helped generate a lot of interesting ideas for future work.

⁵⁰ I discuss these meetings in greater detail in chapter six.

Figure 3 Focus group findings



This picture shows an outcome of one of the focus groups, where class 8 students discussed and tabulated their thoughts on the relationship between education and jobs. The focus groups were primarily conducted in Nepali, but were recorded in English. I confirmed each recorded point with the respondents in Nepali before ending our sessions. (14/10/2012)

I also used Bhumi to host a couple of focus group sessions with recent SLC graduates. Numerous young people had just completed their SLC exam, and the summer of 2012 presented a unique timeframe to understand the transition to higher education and/or employment opportunities. Most students had to come to Bhumi to receive various certificates and endorsements to pursue these opportunities. In addition to interviewing them individually, I met with them in groups during these visits, and these interactions shaped my understanding of their decision-making processes, and the opportunities and constraints they faced in their transition. Their expectations and anxieties after their results and before their higher education admission form a crucial part of my analysis on youth transition.

The *guthi* meetings in Dadagaun provided a convenient setting for focus groups at the village level. *Guthis* are akin to trusts, and they initially arose to share the burden of deaths through communal support, but are now involved in leading most development projects in the village. The *guthi* in Dadagaun was founded by one Newar and seven Magar families in

1964, but has now expanded to include the entire village. The *guthi* meets on the first Saturday of each Nepali month to discuss village proceedings. The meeting takes place in the balcony of the current Chair, led by a working committee of 11 members.⁵¹

I attended all of these meetings during my time there. At the end of the first meeting, I explained the nature of my research and invited villagers to engage with my work. I got approval from the *guthi* chair and consent from the participating villagers to ask some questions at the end of those meetings, time permitting. Unlike the other groups where I could ensure close to full participation from the preceding meetings to my focus groups, the village focus group did not always retain the same number of people as the *guthi* meeting, but a sizeable number of participants remained. The selection bias here was that the most engaged group of villagers who cared enough about the village to attend *guthi* meetings, and to stay till the very end, were also part of the focus group. Their commitment to village issues and willingness to engage further ensured that the discussions were meaningful in addressing the research questions. I explained my research interests and sought consent for their participation at each meeting. They then collectively formed the core of my key informants.

These focus groups provided the space for different stakeholders to discuss their concerns on the same key issues. The nature of these meetings was largely informal and semi-structured, allowing different groups to take greater ownership of the agenda. I was initially concerned that participants might not speak their mind freely for fear of how they would be received by the larger group, but conducting the focus groups after pre-arranged meetings meant that the participants were already in a discursive mood. The history of collective action and debate in the village in the form of the *guthi* facilitated my focus groups because this form of discussions was not alien to them, unlike one-on-one semi-structured interviews, with which they were neither familiar nor experienced. While it is to be expected that some people were more vocal and active than others, some very interesting ideas sprung out from these focus group discussions. The individual semi-structured interviews thus allowed even respondents who might be shy to share their thoughts in private whereas the focus groups helped identify and discuss key issues in public. The organic growth and significance of particular ideas over others in focus groups involving different stakeholders (for instance, SLC results and student discipline for teachers, playground and school resources for students, scholarships and employment opportunities for young people, and

⁵¹ I discuss the role and relevance of *guthis* in greater detail in chapter five.

development projects and family concerns for Dadagaun villagers) signified the suitability of the research method in understanding the different interests and concerns for these groups.

d. Learning by Teaching

I am conscious of the danger that research can be extractive when we situate ourselves in various contexts as researchers, asking numerous, often annoying, questions, and then leaving once we complete our work. I wanted to give back to the communities I worked with beyond the theoretical and empirical contributions of the research, and so I was constantly trying to help in any immediate way possible. During my M. Phil. research, I had offered to teach some school subjects to children at the Chepang school as a way of giving back. While my intentions were entirely innocent, I quickly found that teaching was actually a very effective research method to learn about the education system. The key challenge concerned being able to ensure that I received consent from all students in each classroom for the entirety of the research. While it was logistically not possible to receive such consent at every instance, I sought to address this to the best of my ability by regularly asking for verbal consent from the students as well as their teachers. I was concerned that students might feel pressured to agree to speak to me because of my partial role as a teacher, and so I sought to explicitly state regularly that they could choose not to participate. Even with their explicit consent, I am aware that some of them might have felt pressured despite my best efforts.

Through this teaching experience, I got a close first-hand account of the curriculum, available resources, teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and student grasp of the material. The teaching allowed me to interact with students in an academic setting, and made it easier for me to communicate with *all* of them. The relationship forged in the classroom continued outside too, as I encouraged students to meet me after-hours if they had any further questions. I believe I made a small contribution to their learning too, as I incorporated engaging methods of teaching (stories, contemporary analogies, participatory learning, etc.) to which they were receptive.

I intended to take a similar approach at Bhumi for this research, and the opportunity presented itself sooner than expected. When I arrived at Bhumi, one of the school teachers had just taken up an offer to teach at a prestigious residential private school in Kathmandu. The Principal asked me if I could cover for him while they began proceedings to hire a replacement teacher. I requested that the Principal announce during the school assembly that I was a researcher, and I explained the purpose of my visit to the school. However, I agreed to

help the school and taught primarily Math and Science classes to 6th, 7th, and 8th graders for three weeks. I wanted to clarify my roles to the students, so I began most classes by emphasizing that I was at the school as a researcher, but I was helping out by taking some substitution lessons. This teaching experience helped chart out the current state of classroom learning, which set the tone for future investigations.

When the school hired a replacement teacher, I stopped teaching regular classes, but the school often relied on me as a substitute teacher to cover for teacher absences. This role allowed me to help the school while also making it possible for me to engage with the students in a formal, classroom setting. During these lessons, I tried to provide a window to the wider world to which these students did not have meaningful access. In particular, I relied on playing games (such as Hangman), reading newspaper articles to discuss current events, and screening short documentaries to engage students to think about social issues. These activities helped me reach out to students and pique their curiosity in a new way, which helped our interactions inside and outside the classroom.

e. Community-led Household Survey

I have always been deeply concerned with making my research easily accessible to the communities with whom I work, and my methodological choices are influenced by this concern. Instead of relying on a traditional household survey where the researcher fills out questionnaires to map out the key demographics of the village, I thus relied on Dadagaun residents to generate this data and understand its composition. This approach allowed me to triangulate my findings further to ensure their accuracy. Their active participation in generating and understanding this data also made my research more relatable and relevant for them. The rich data I was able to generate with their support has been central in identifying trends and piecing together the overall narrative around education and employment.

The first phase of this method involved drawing a map of the village. I provided the stationery to draw a rough sketch of the village, marking as many details as possible. Houses, places of worship, water taps, local shops, major roads, and telecommunication towers were identified and labelled. The map was drawn over the course of a week at various tea shops, in plain view of other villagers. Two high-school students took the lead on physically drawing the map, but many villagers deliberated on the exact placements of various markers. The complete map then formed the basis to label each house and identify household characteristics. Taking each house at a time, I began to ask villagers to tabulate relevant

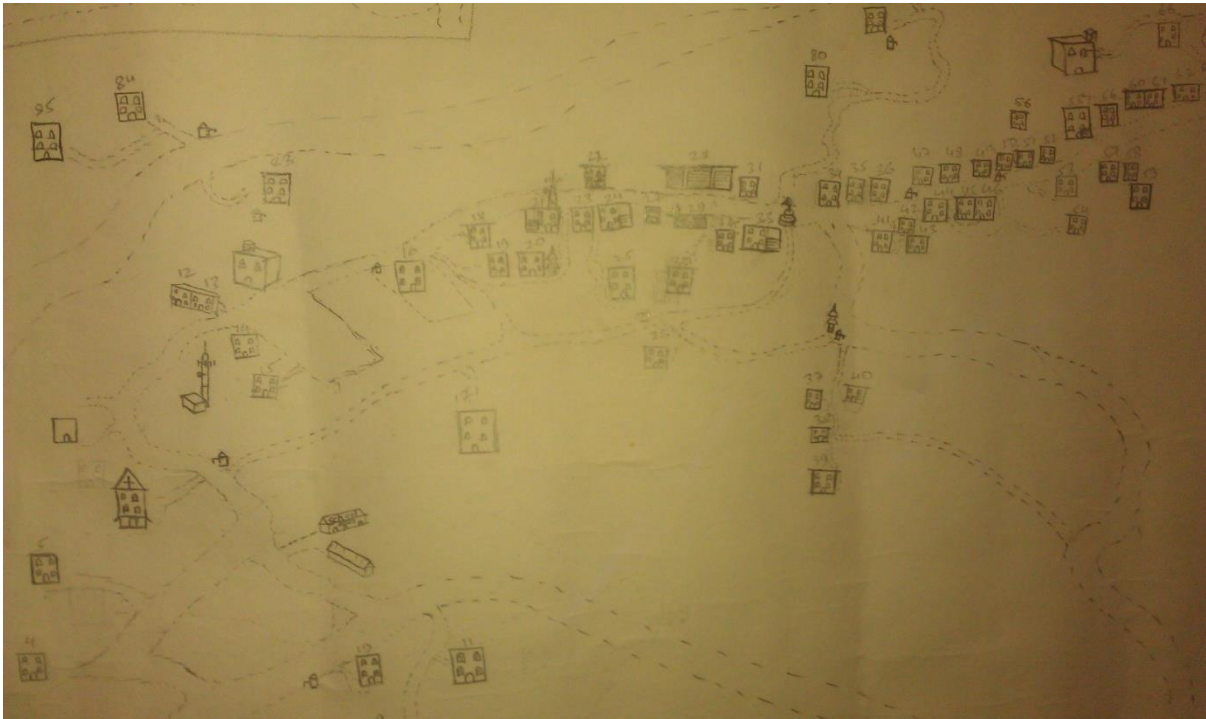
information about the residents. I scheduled these ‘data’ sessions in the early afternoons each day, because both young and old people would congregate around tea shops at that time. Since the village is well-contained and everyone knows each other, I was able to generate a lot of information about these households. I asked for people’s names, ages, family size and member names, occupation, marital status, education levels, employment histories, land ownership and sale, and abroad experience. These questions were not directed to specific individuals but to a group of community members. It took us two weeks to tabulate our household findings, after which I sought to verify the information by repeating the whole process. I shared these findings with villagers in private and in public, and followed up on inconsistencies to ensure that I got the most reliable information possible.

Figure 4 Villagers drawing a map of the village



A recent SLC graduate draws a draft of the village map at a tea shop while other villagers discuss and look on.

Figure 5 Map of the village drawn by the villagers



This participatory method is consistent with Robert Chamber's (2008) emphasis on participatory numbers as an alternative to survey methodologies. The traditional survey model would have required the researcher to develop a questionnaire, which could then be administered to the respondents. The resulting data would have been based on self-reporting, which would have ensured that some information could have been more accurate. For instance, it can be expected that many people would be able to report their age and their exact schooling years accurately, while the same information might not be as accurate when determined through collective knowledge.⁵² However, self-reported data are not necessarily more accurate in all contexts, because respondents can sometimes manipulate information to appease the enumerator or portray a different image of themselves to the researchers.⁵³ As an example, one of the elderly men had claimed to me that he was a high-ranking government official who was among the first people in the village to acquire an educational degree. During the mapping process, however, the villagers noted that he had not completed primary schooling, and had worked as a helper (*peon*) in a library. This participatory data generation thus provided another avenue for triangulation through the local knowledge of community members, as it allowed me to check for the accuracy of my findings from personal

⁵² Some people, particularly from the grandparent generation, do not know their own age, but this is more the exception than the rule these days.

interviews. The transparency and accountability provided by collecting data from and submitting it to the village thus ensured its validity further.

f. 'Virtual' Research

Advancements in technology and social media as well as their penetration into rural areas are quickly changing the nature of ethnographic fieldwork. I could already feel the impact of this penetration when students, teachers, and sometimes even parents sent me various requests to connect in social media. I generally tried to play down my presence online at the time, but felt obligated to accept these requests once I left the village. This 'connection' also allowed me to stay in touch with people from Bhumi and Dadagaun, which helped me maintain these relationships.

The incidental benefits of these connections became evident to me during the analysis and writing up phase of the thesis. No fieldwork can ever be completed in the sense that new questions and curiosities always emerge, so at some point the logistics of timing (and funding) dictate when data collection has to come to an end. As some of these questions, often simple queries that required very minute but important clarifications, emerged after I had left the field, I was able to pose many of them to my friends back in Nepal. I was connected to quite a few students and teachers in Dadagaun and Bhumi, and they continued their kindness by responding to my queries in a timely fashion. For instance, I needed to find out the last names of a few former students, the missing exam results for some students, and the extended relationships between some Dadagaun villagers, and I could reliably rely on my contacts to provide such information. I have also been able to relay back my findings and discuss concerns about ethical engagement and presentation of data with my respondents. Their continued responses and updates even after 2012 have thus enhanced the findings of this thesis.

IV. Reflexivity, Positionality, and Ethical Considerations

In the course of this research, I have come to understand as much about myself as I have about my research interests. It has been a constant process of self-reflection, trying to figure out the fine line between careful analysis and reflected biases. While I have made a conscious effort to be reflexive throughout and be forthright about my own positionality, such an endeavour is not an outcome but a process upon which I continue to reflect.

I believe that the identity and positionality of the researcher plays a significant role in the process and outcome of research. I was conscious that my Nepali identity might affect the

boundaries between the self and ‘the other’. Ethnographic work is traditionally believed to be carried out best in a detached setting, where the researcher is researching ‘the other’. Bronislaw Malinowski (1961), considered the pioneer of participant observation, conducted his research famously among the Trobrianders, and led the way for future research of ‘the other’. A sense of detachment can give the researcher a bird’s-eye view of the situation, where the researcher is not closely tied to the context and hence can observe and understand it as it arises. However, researching a known context can be “a source of insight” (Srinivas 1966: 154). I was already aware of many facts of life associated with the research, and so I could acclimatize much faster than a foreigner. For instance, I knew the basic structure and content of the education system, approximate school and vacation dates, and appropriate values and norms for my field context, which are clear advantages during and after fieldwork. I saved a lot of time during my fieldwork because I did not have to learn a language because Nepali, my mother tongue, was the lingua-franca throughout my research sites. This native understanding of the language also allowed me to grasp nuances and subtleties of social interactions that could have escaped other researchers.

I agree with Lila Abu-Lughod’s analysis regarding ‘halfies’ (people whose national or cultural identity is mixed by virtue of migration, overseas education, or parentage): to assume that someone from the same nationality cannot be impartial in her research is to accept that ‘the other’ is impartial in their research (1991). Both types of researchers bring their own value systems that need to be acknowledged.⁵⁴ It is not possible to dissociate our identities and our biases completely; researchers should instead be mindful of minimizing them while also recognizing when and how our interpretations might be reflections on our worldviews, not our experiences.

I was also made to question my own identity as the ‘non-other’, for my identity as a Nepali is not my only or even necessarily my most prominent one. While I am a Nepali, I also personified other identities such as that of being an alleged Chhetri (caste), Western educated, middle class, and male. As Kiran Narayan argues, “Factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race, or sheer duration of contact may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status” (1993: 672). By this token, then, even Abu-Lughod’s analysis falls short, because these multiple identities

⁵⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1836) *Democracy in America* provides a study of ‘the other’ but it is obvious throughout that his engagement with democracy in the US was shaped by the trajectory of the aristocracy in France, his native country. Louis Dumont, a French anthropologist whose research on caste in India is widely celebrated, approached his work grounded in French structuralism (1970).

cannot be reduced to two halves, because they manifest themselves in different ways in different circumstances. My otherness was obvious when many people older and more worthy of respect referred to me as ‘Sir’.⁵⁵ I was not comfortable assuming that title, especially as I had not earned it. I sought to exude those identities with which I identified, rather than the identity with which they perceived me. For example, I do not believe in the discriminatory caste system and I was able to convince them through my words and actions. That I willingly chose to live and eat with a Magar family and did not adhere to any of the ‘traditional’ caste expectations in my everyday interactions with various caste groups- be it Tamang, Newar or Chhetri- quickly convinced them that I was serious about my views on caste. I referred to the people I knew in the village with the same respectful, familial relational terms (such as *dai*, *bhauju*, *bhai*, *bahini*: respectively: older brother, (older) sister-in-law, younger brother, younger sister) they used for each other. Within a couple of weeks, most of them shed the ‘Sir’ title. Perhaps the most satisfying moment during my time there was when a matriarch casually told me that I had now become like them and so I should buy some land in the village and live there. I am not suggesting that I became a part of their community and shed my otherness completely, but my relationships in the field were much more complex to be captured by the ‘other’ nexus alone. Identities and relationships adjust and change with time and context, so it is more important to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of conducting research in one’s own country or elsewhere, rather than making a judgment on which one might be better than the other.

If part of my identity had been assumed, yet others were acquired in the field. Most noticeably, my teaching responsibilities at Bhumi, while temporary, nonetheless granted me a particular position in society. Given the low levels of literacy among the parent generation, teachers are held in high regard in rural areas. My teaching duties also helped people place me in the community, as then I did not just have to be a researcher, a job description with which locals were not entirely familiar, particularly because I was also not a foreigner. In the early days when I was still getting to know everyone and building relationships, my introduction (by others) as a teacher at the local school noticeably changed the attitude of several villagers from casual indifference for my work to engaged interest. At the same time, though, my relationship with the students especially acquired dual meanings, because I was not only trying to find out about their schooling and their lives, but also assigning them

⁵⁵ Note that the use of the term ‘Sir’ was not always related to my engagement as a teacher at Bhumi. While male teachers are addressed with this title, it is also used more generally as a term of respect and deference.

homework and asking them difficult questions in class. I tried hard to bridge this gap by spending a lot of time with them even outside the classroom, and gave up teaching altogether for a few months towards the end. Even in the classrooms, I did not have to teach within the specific confines of the curriculum (as a substitute teacher), so I used the opportunity to bond with them by introducing new, engaging techniques that were enjoyable to them. For instance, as I noted earlier, I showed 8th and 9th grade students Nepali and English documentaries to discuss some of the social issues mentioned in their textbooks. Similarly, I played a game called Hangman to introduce new English words to primary school students. Nonetheless, my teaching responsibilities, which I took seriously, meant that my relationship with the students acquired another layer of complexity during my presence there, because of the power dynamics embedded in a teacher-student relationship. While I did my best to mitigate the impact of this role, I continue to reflect on the real challenges posed by my teacher-researcher identity.

Throughout my time at Bhumi and Dadagaun, I was conscious that being a teacher afforded me a particular identity and a particular status within the community. I was concerned that the villagers might feel obligated to talk to me or answer my questions, or be worried that my research would somehow affect students. I made sure to discuss at length with villagers both privately and publicly during formal and informal meetings that they were under no obligation to participate in my research. Although I had been introduced to the village by the school in a sense, I made sure that everyone knew that I had only met school representatives recently, so I did not have any established relationships with the school either. I am aware that at some level the villagers would always associate me with the school, but I worked hard to demonstrate that my stay as well as my research was completely independent of my association with the school. The extended nature of my stay and the repeated conversations about my research were crucial in ensuring that Dadagaun villagers and students did not only consider me as a Bhumi teacher. I am conscious, however, that my research participants could have felt that they did not have a choice but to respond to my requests, even though I took every possible precaution to give them this choice.

I had to remain mindful of my privileged position throughout the course of the fieldwork. Although I shared meals and lived with a local family and became a member of the village, I always had an escape clause. I could commute to the city at a moment's notice, and sometimes took short breaks when things got overwhelming in the field. I wanted to downplay the difference in our circumstances as much as possible, but simple facts of my

everyday existence still stood in contrast to my respondents' everyday lives. For instance, I owned a laptop and a nice phone, and I could afford to install an internet package when it became available in the village. These differences turned into ethical quandaries most vividly in the school setting. Every day, there was an afternoon recess (called tiffin) from 1.20 p.m. to 2 p.m., when students and teachers took a break for snacks since the school day is between 6 to 8 hours each day. According to my findings, about 30% of students brought some food with them from home (leftover meals, boiled corn, beaten rice, or processed food like biscuits or instant noodles), another 30% brought money (Rs 5 or Rs 10) to buy snacks from either the local shop or a couple of street vendors, while the remaining 40% of students did not eat anything throughout the school day. Some students claimed not to be hungry, but it was clear that most of them could not afford their afternoon snack. Since I was expected to eat with the teachers at the local shop a small distance away from the school, I could technically escape this situation physically, but the fact that so many students remained hungry throughout the day weighed on my mind. I was also affected by the visible inequality, as some children had to see their classmates eat while they remained hungry. Having grown up in similar circumstances, I know how difficult it can be in such situations but I did not have the resources to feed everyone. The best I could do was to discuss with students the importance of sharing with classmates and to encourage them to look after each other.

My education, background, and current international lifestyle were a source of constant inquiry and aspiration, particularly among the youth. Because I was making a career out of asking other people about their lives, I wanted to reciprocate by answering their queries about me as well. One of the main aspirations of Dadagaun children and youth is to go abroad, so they were fascinated by my life trajectory from a village in eastern Nepal to the US and the UK. Even the best stories of migration from the village involved a lot of (manual) hard work and were told within the context of numerous sacrifices, financial or otherwise. They thus took my travels and opportunities on account of generous scholarships to elite education institutions as inspiration, and were always keen to inquire how I could open similar pathways for them. I tried my best to not raise their hopes unreasonably, even as I sought to advise them generally on how they could pursue better opportunities.

There was a unique interplay between my identities as researcher and 'successful' student. People were more willing to discuss their educational and other circumstances with me in the hope that I could somehow guide them to a life of opportunity, preferably abroad.

A lot of young people also spent more time with me in the hopes that they could learn from me, and I could feel a sense of expectation in some of these interactions. Although I was researching education and employment issues, then, at the same time my respondents were concurrently trying to improve their educational and employment opportunities through me. There was thus the need to be extra cautious to ensure that their responses were based on their experiences and not just as a means to influence me for other motives.

The extended nature of my fieldwork helped with understanding and contextualizing these responses, but their questions and concerns nonetheless warranted attention. It was not always an easy task to balance my role as a researcher with my desire to facilitate change for the better. As a researcher, I had been told of the need to remain neutral, trying only to uncover and understand the issues at hand. However, remaining neutral was not always an option when I had developed meaningful relationships with the respondents, and they were seeking my help in good faith. I am a student of development not only because I want to understand the process but also because I want to facilitate it in the most moral, equitable, and just way possible. As such, when people sought my help in their search for meaningful transitions to higher education and employment, I advised them to the best of my ability.

There were times when I was requested to assume an authoritative responsibility in the village. There were a number of cases involving intoxicated people arguing with other villagers or their own spouses, and if I happened to be within earshot, they sought my help in taking a position in their disputes. As far as reasonably possible, I tried not to interject directly, but if I was forced to speak up, I tried to pacify the situation with as little involvement as possible. There were some obvious ethical dilemmas at play here, because I would not always know the details behind the disputes, and would not want to be labelled as supporting one person or the other. Usually I was fortunate to have other villagers not involved in these disputes around me, who often either interjected on my behalf or found ways to remove me from the situation. However, in the rare instances where some physical altercations took place, I had to join other villagers to prevent the fights from escalating. I was conscious of the danger of becoming embroiled in a local dispute, but to merely be a bystander or disappear from such a situation without intervening would also place me as a firm outsider who would not act even under desperate circumstances.

I was also consciously aware of the gendered nature of my interactions during this research. Men tended to occupy public spaces in greater numbers, and so I ended up spending

more time with them. It was culturally appropriate for me to spend time with young men, and while I could speak to young women freely, these interactions did not always take place organically but had to be coordinated, and often took place in private spaces (such as their homes). Married as well as young women who helped with the village shops were the key exceptions to this rule, because they served in public spaces where men mostly congregated. I talked to these shopkeeper women and their daughters at greater length over time, but my relative access to women was limited to private visits to people's homes. Such differences were not limited to the village; my interactions with female teachers were also limited in comparison to male teachers. Once again, I did not face any problems interacting directly with female teachers or discussing various issues with them, but casual discussions with female teachers alone were rare, except with a few exceptional teachers. I tried to balance these differences by being more proactive about engaging female teachers and Dadagaun women, and with some success, but the nature of the interactions were often slightly different. I did not face this challenge with children though, because boys and girls alike occupied public spaces and attended schools. There were no cultural restrictions to their mobility or their interactions with the opposite gender yet, so I could engage with them more freely.

Although I might have been considered an outsider in some ways, I was also expected to represent the school and the village to the outside world. At Bhumi, for instance, the school teachers asked me to engage with visitors because of my command of English as well as my intimate acquired knowledge of the school. The teachers felt that I could discuss and advocate the needs of the school from an impartial perspective, and so sought my support on numerous occasions. The school hosted an international volunteer teacher, and they asked me to guide her throughout her month-long stay. Bhumi teachers encouraged me to engage with representatives from the One Laptop per Child project, and I was invited to sit in on discussions with potential national and international donors.⁵⁶ When the local Junior Red Cross Circle invited Japanese members to visit the school or when international volunteers came to Bhumi to teach first aid, the school requested my presence and advice. I took these opportunities to mean that I had been accepted as a member of the school community, and sought to help the school as a way of giving back for their generosity in hosting me during the course of the research. I was aware that I could be co-opted as a voice for the school

⁵⁶ The school was one of two schools selected as a pilot site for the One Laptop Per Child project in Nepal, whereby school students were given sturdy laptops to aide their curriculum. The school was selected by the Ministry of Education three years ago in recognition of the school's consistently impressive performance.

rather than an independent researcher, so I made it clear that I would be honest about my views during these discussions, rather than censor them only to fit the interests of the school.

The extent of my association with the school continued to pose ethical dilemmas even after I left the school. During numerous private discussions as well as public presentations of my work, the school continued to garner interest from academics, bureaucrats, other school proprietors, journalists, and philanthropists. However, I had pledged before beginning the research that I would ensure the anonymity of the school and the respondents through all reasonable means. Where these requests appeared genuinely concerned with the future of the school and sought to support its growth, I did not want to impede such partnerships but I was determined to fulfil my ethical obligations. In such situations, instead of disclosing the school's details to various people, I passed on the information about the interested parties to Bhumi's administration and gave them the choice in terms of whether they wanted to pursue these leads further.

Part of my determination to make this research a participatory process involved sharing my research findings and analysis with the respondents. The nurturing of my relationship with my respondents in Dadagaun and Bhumi helped me discuss and disburse my research findings within these communities. When I returned to Nepal in 2013 on two occasions to attend various conferences, I met with key stakeholders at both the village and the school, and presented my research to them. I made it clear that while I would not change my conclusions simply because they might not like them, I invited them to reflect on the evidence I used to come to those conclusions. I laid out my key arguments, and they were satisfied with how I had represented them and their data in this thesis. This return of findings back to the communities and deference to verify facts with the respondents themselves served as another form of triangulation of information for greater accuracy. Such an interactive exchange of information and ideas also provide the platform for feedback and suggestions to the communities, so that the research remains relevant not only to the researcher(s) but also the respondents. It was thus another small way of giving back to these communities.

a. Research, Activism, and Ethics: a melting pot

As I sought to balance my role as researcher with my instinctive desire to be a contributing member of society, different scenarios emerged where I had to decide whether to prioritize my research interests or contribute towards outcomes for the betterment of the

community. I always deliberated at length to ensure that I caused no harm, but numerous ethical concerns arose regardless of whether I chose to act or to not act in these situations.

This dilemma was at its most vivid when 10th grade Bhumi students successfully completed their SLC exams and were preparing for their future. Of the 20 students who had appeared for the SLC, four achieved Distinctions, and there were many others who secured high scores. While these results were celebrated throughout the region, a number of these successful students were considering quitting further education because of their poverty. These students planned to look for admission at any college that would take them for minimal fees, but one or two students were contemplating migrating to the Middle East to work as labourers. As a researcher, I was able to capture a lot of interesting insights on the decision-making processes around transitions to higher education and employment, and these findings inform the core of this thesis. However, I had also developed close friendships with a number of these students, teachers, and parents, and I was a temporary resident of the village. As these talented students faced these difficult decisions, I could no longer remain a bystander.

In some ways, the choice to act was not entirely mine in any case. Numerous students, teachers, and parents asked my advice on how to proceed further, and I could not realistically distance myself by claiming my researcher status. However, I acknowledge that my biases came into play here. Throughout my life, I have been afforded the opportunity to pursue various education opportunities through the benevolence of others. The quality of education I have received has played a transformative role in improving my future prospects. I am aware that it is precisely this kind of story that drives the development narrative on the power of education, but the poorest and most marginalized rarely have access to such education. At this juncture, I could not bear the thought of these talented students being denied better opportunities because of their poverty, so I took a more active role for these students to continue their education. I coordinated with some friends to source the resources required to support their transition to higher education, and have since been involved with guiding a number of them.

This involvement beyond my research interests raised a number of ethical considerations. Since we had limited resources, we could only ensure support for some of the students from the school. In order to remove any doubt of bias, we asked Bhumi to make the necessary selections based on academic achievement. My instinctive reaction had been to try to downplay my involvement entirely, instead working anonymously through the school.

However, this approach soon raised a number of other ethical considerations, including the stifled flow of information allowing for numerous unfounded rumours to surface in the village. I thus attended a scheduled village meeting to discuss our support to meritorious needy students, and explained how the selection was made based on SLC scores. These discussions were extremely important because we could clarify all the misconceptions around the support, and parents, students, community members, and school teachers came together to figure out a way forward. The problem of limited resources still meant that some students did not get similar support, and from a personal perspective I was closer to these students. The selection process was designed to remain fair, but I tried to compensate for the inability to support everyone financially by providing them detailed suggestions on their higher education options. Together with the school, we explored scholarship options through the government, approached individual schools where students were seeking admission to lower fees, and read English newspapers to prepare them for English medium instruction.

This engagement was the culmination of the interplay between research and action. The support we provide these meritorious needy students is based exclusively on the findings of this research, as we seek to address the shortcomings they face in their transition to higher education and employment. At a time when the research agenda is being increasingly assessed based on its potential for impact, our work was necessary precisely because we uncovered a demonstrable need for action. Our active involvement in this process of transition also provided me a unique insight to the opportunities and constraints public school graduates and their families face in their pursuit of higher education, further enhancing this research. A number of difficult decisions had to be made, and I had to be extremely careful to maintain ethical integrity and not harm anyone. Although there was a steep learning curve, being open with the communities involved and holding close consultations with the relevant stakeholders allowed us to place high-achieving students into good schools for their higher secondary education. I continue to reflect on our work to ensure that we provide relevant and sustainable support to these students, and our network now relies on the findings and analysis from this research in implementing this work.

I discuss the notion of becoming a victim of one's own success in the context of Bhumi in chapter six, but I am facing similar circumstances with our work in some ways. The process to support these talented students was reactive, as I had no premeditated intention of being involved in this way. However, since my friends and I have gotten involved, we have invested our time and energy to support these students, and the outcomes have been

impressive enough to the extent that we have received some national and international media attention for our work. The ethical challenge then has been to respect the anonymity of research participants.

The issue of protecting the identity of respondents is already complicated in today's digital era, where the spread of information is instantaneous and not always under the control of the researcher. The use of pseudonyms for all names and places, as I have done in this thesis, provides one level of protection to the respondents, but I have felt upon reflection that this protection is far from absolute. The descriptive details that add value and substance to the argument, such as the history and context of the school or the socio-economic background of the village, also immediately allow inquisitive minds to investigate the places and ultimately the people behind the stories we tell. I have had to thus accept that my concern for the identity of my respondents can only provide one level of protection. For instance, the recognition we have received for our work with students has proven beneficial to our respondents in many ways, but I have also had to struggle with the fact that their identity is now further compromised. I discussed in great detail with the students, the parents, and their teachers the particular concerns that could arise because of this problem with ensuring anonymity, given the sensitive nature of some of the material presented in this thesis. The strong conviction to do no harm compelled me to raise even potentially 'worst-case scenarios' with them so that they were informed about the circumstances as they emerged. The utility of virtual research became evident once again, as social media allowed me to continue these conversations with parents and the school principal throughout the process, rather than limiting them only to my physical presence during fieldwork. I believe the trust we have shared over the years played a role, but all of them reaffirmed their consent for me to present these findings even when I explained the potential complications involved. I remain concerned about the renewed challenge of ensuring anonymity for research participants, and continue to reflect on ways to protect their identities to the extent that it is possible. I try to ensure no harm, even as I come to terms with the fact that there are limits to my own ability to control the use and abuse of the findings of my thesis.

V. Limitations and Further Research

Despite my best efforts, I recognize a number of limitations with this research. Some of these limitations are highlighted here to provide perspective early on about what has and has not been done, and what could be done to bolster the findings. However, these

constraints, which are not necessarily exhaustive, do not dilute the importance of the findings. Instead, they set the platform upon which further research can be based to build a more comprehensive analysis of the status of education and employment in rural contexts and with marginalized communities, both in Nepal and elsewhere.

The first obvious shortcoming of this research is the inability to conduct a longitudinal study to understand these processes of transition from schooling to higher education and employment. While it was possible to trace the general life trajectories of the parent generation through detailed interviews, the life trajectories of the younger generation have to be followed over time to fully comprehend how their pathways will evolve. I relied on ethnographic portraits to capture these trajectories in snapshots within the same timeframe, and I have tried to stay abreast with the evolution of this trajectory through my sustained relationships in the school and the village, which has been facilitated by social media. This research has been able to identify a number of emerging trends on young people's transitions to higher education and employment as a result, but a longitudinal study would have helped us comment more authoritatively on these processes over time.

Another shortcoming concerns the specificity of the field site and its related implications. I selected a semi-peripheral village in the outskirts of the capital city by design, as I have detailed above, but the site limits the potential to make generalizations concerning the transition to higher education and employment throughout the country. Dadagaun residents are able to commute to the capital in pursuit of opportunities that are not available to the large majority of the rural population, whose pathways for mobility can be very different. Besides geography, the size and composition of the village and the school, their history, and their current circumstances all present further questions about the applicability of these findings to other schools, other villages, and the life trajectories of people throughout Nepal and beyond. A comparative approach that looked at another milieu to build a more comprehensive picture of these issues would help further bolster these findings. My research with the Chepangs, who are unfortunately not the focus of this study, confirms that these findings are relevant to a wider audience, but a more explicit multi-sited research would provide greater impetus in understanding these outcomes.

The scope of this study limited attention primarily on Bhumi students and Dadagaun residents. The focus was concentrated on the public school system and its graduates because most Dadagaun residents, as well as poor people from rural places across the nation, rely on

the public school system. Nonetheless, the thesis makes numerous references and comparisons with local private schools. I was able to conduct some primary research to contextualize student experiences in private schools, but I only carried out situated research in the public school because of time and logistical constraints. I make use of the secondary literature on private schooling in Nepal to compare and contrast different pathways for transition, but future work on higher education and employment can be strengthened by pursuing a concurrent emphasis on the life experiences and trajectories of local private school students.

The evolution of a research project from its inception in the form of a vague research question to its apparent conclusion in the form of a thesis is necessarily messy. Although the hope would be for the thesis to give the impression of a linear, clear process, the room to test, adapt, and change ideas is important to allow the findings to guide the ultimate argument. Retrospectively, it became obvious that I should have focused on a number of particular issues during my fieldwork to bolster the findings of this thesis. As an example, during the data analysis and writing up phase, I realized that my claims about the role and relevance of education quality could be strengthened significantly through a systematic analysis of school curriculum. Although I assess education quality through numerous internal and external proxies, the failure to analyze curriculum is a shortcoming of this thesis. I use some secondary literature to fill this gap, but further work on the relationship between education and employment could be bolstered with a more direct engagement with the school curriculum. Similarly, an in-depth analysis of the rapid rise of conversions to Christianity in my field site would have facilitated my arguments on the alternative strategies people employ to meet their aspirations for upward mobility. I refer prominently to one case of conversion in this thesis, and provide some references to other relevant work in Nepal, but much more remains to be understood and explained. This thesis must thus be considered not only an outcome but also a work in progress, and these limitations represent the possibilities for further research on these topics.

Finally, although I have explained the rationale for a number of logistical and methodological choices (in the second chapter), I must nonetheless note that these can also be considered to be shortcomings of the thesis. For instance, the analysis on education has been reduced almost entirely to focus on formal schooling. This was necessary for a number of reasons, but it remains a central limitation of the thesis; future work will have to explore people's life trajectories based not only on their formal schooling status and credentialing but

also on various other forms of informal and non-formal education that might affect these outcomes. Acknowledging one's assumptions and limitations is necessary but not sufficient, as we need to continue to test these assumptions and apply corrective measures to address our limitations to push the boundaries of inquiry and knowledge further. This thesis should thus be considered the first step but not the only step towards understanding the relationship between education, employment, and transition for marginalized communities in Nepal.

5. Education in Dadagaun: An Inter-generational Analysis

I. Introduction

This chapter presents the trajectory of education pursuits in Dadagaun and highlights the value the village places on formal schooling. I analyze the educational background of the parent generation and the dominant narratives around their experiences with and expectations from the school system (section two). I assess here the rise of Bhumi School, the status of formal schooling, and the outcomes and understandings of education among the older cohort of villagers. I establish the role of education as a positional good, where even a few years of schooling differentiated some people from the rest of the village at the time. I then focus on the engagement of young people in formal schooling to examine the pattern of education decisions in recent years (section three). I demonstrate how the education experiences from the past few decades affected current decisions about pursuing schooling. Next, I elucidate the changing experiences of children and narratives of childhood with the help of three life stories of boys and girls who made tremendous sacrifices in their pursuit of secondary schooling (section four). The empirical evidence provided in this chapter illustrates people's aspirations from education and how they have evolved over time, its value as a social and a positional good, and the significant difficulties poor people face in their pursuit of education. The chapter critiques the narrow focus of the life-stages model, which assumes a linear transition from childhood and schooling to employment and adulthood. I highlight the active participation of children in economic activities even while they are receiving education to demonstrate instead the multiple pathways for these transitions.

II. Education and the Parent Generation

Dadagaun's first, serious engagement with formal schooling began when Bhumi School was established in 1983. In this section, I will first describe the emergence of Bhumi and then contextualize the status of education at the time.

Bhumi's humble beginnings mirror the origins of countless other primary schools across rural Nepal. Bishnu Thapa was one of the first people from his village to pursue education. He had not even completed his secondary schooling when he decided to round up children from neighbouring villages to educate them. Every morning, he would walk thirty minutes uphill to Dadagaun, a central village in the region, to collect young children and take them to the school. He often cajoled children with offers of biscuits and free meals to ensure their enthusiasm. There was no school infrastructure, or indeed a charter, to begin with, but

the villagers reported that when an educated man told you to do something at the time, the rest followed.

Bishnu would bring the children with him to a *chautari*—a public gathering place under a large tree—to teach them there. The *chautari* was next to a temple and so considered auspicious as the site for the school. The children would sit on the floor while the teacher wrote the Nepali alphabet on a hand-held blackboard. As word spread that a school had come to life, more children began to pour in, establishing Bishnu's credentials as a teacher.

The value that the locality placed on education was reflected by the support they provided Bishnu and his eventual team. Until Bhumi's birth, they did not have any viable choice to send their children to school, so when the opportunity arose, villagers started to send their children. However, it was not always feasible to hold classes in the open. Soon, locals offered their sheds and their homes to host the new intake of students. Although nobody in the area had completed their secondary schooling at the time, motivated young people, often only having completed lower secondary level themselves, offered to teach primary school students. The school received support from the state for a few salaried positions, but the initial years were difficult due to the lack of appropriate resources, including classrooms, stationery, and textbooks.

The school's fortunes changed decisively in the last decade through some unrelated and unexpected events. The real estate boom in Nepal extended to the periphery of Kathmandu Valley, with land prices increasing several fold within a few years. As the rate of migration to Kathmandu from the rest of the country increased rapidly, many rich people began buying land in the outskirts of the city. The community where Bhumi stood was no exception, as land sales became the norm in the region. The school is situated on a small hill surrounded by greenery, affording an unadulterated view of the valley below. Interestingly, most people who lived in the area sold their land because they wanted to move downhill to the plains. However, the very land that appeared unsuitable to these villagers became attractive to rich investors who envisioned investing in hotels or resorts far enough away from the city to avoid distraction but close enough to be within commuting distance. Within years, the dynamic of the village changed as the local population decreased rapidly.

The villagers who left did not resettle too far. Their move thirty minutes downhill did not displace their association with the school. Instead, when the rich patrons, particularly two wealthy businessmen, wanted to buy land in the region, the villagers and the teachers

approached them for support. The newcomers obliged, with one businessman donating the land where the school now stands as well as paying for the construction of a multi-room structure. With the basic material infrastructure in place, Bhumi's immediate future is no longer at risk.

Figure 6 Aerial view of Bhumi



Bhumi's unique location on a remote hill in an isolated area was not convenient, but it has persisted over the years because of its special relationship with Dadagaun. Despite being a thirty-minute walk to the school, children from Dadagaun have predominantly attended Bhumi since its inception, although there are some other schools (both public and private) within a similar radius from the village. According to Amit Shrestha, a Dadagaun villager, "The school has survived because of our village but if any of our villagers are educated, it is because of the school." The relationship flourished, with over 90% of Dadagaun children currently enrolled at Bhumi.

Access to education for Dadagaun residents was severely limited until Bhumi grew to become a secondary school.⁵⁷ Until Bhumi's rise, the attitudes towards education as well as

⁵⁷ I will discuss the nature and significance of this transition from a primary to a secondary school and its wider implications in subsequent chapters.

the opportunity costs of education were different. Jyoti Tamang, a forty-year-old mother of three, reported that she never stepped inside any school's premises when growing up, although she regularly goes to her children's school now.

At the time, in our age, there was no one in the village who studied, especially sisters. Schools were really far away, and we had to go so far away if we wanted to study. It would take us all morning just to get there, so that's why we didn't go. As soon as I could carry water [jars], I worked...all my life, that's all I did. I started carrying grass [for livestock] as soon as I could cut grass. I got married when I was 14 years old, and I had to carry 50 kg bags. So it was really hard, as I have worked all my life. Ever since I was born, this is what I know, so what else can I do? (31/10/2012)

Such stories of difficulties in accessing education as well as the need to complete household chores were repeated frequently by Dadagaun residents, men and women alike. Children were expected to work from a young age, and the opportunity costs of education in terms of time and effort to get to school were high. Anita Thapa Magar recounted a more accidental reasoning behind not enrolling in school.

My parents sometimes told me to go to study but in those days I did not have brains to go to study, and now I regret that decision. I had a lot of brothers and sisters in my family who were telling us to go to school but in those days we did not care much. Maybe if I had gone then I would know a few things, even if not a lot, but I never went and I regret that now. Instead, I would just play and eat and cut grass, and I wasted that time. (11/12/2012)

Although her parents sometimes encouraged her to go to school, Anita claimed that her parents' illiteracy meant that they did not recognise the value of education and so did not push her enough. Schooling was not considered a central part of childhood, and she regrets she was not pushed enough even when she did not go to school.

If I had studied a bit, then maybe something would happen. Maybe I could help with the economic wellbeing of the family and help my husband. Now I can only hope to make sure that my children get educated. During our time, no one placed any importance on education, so we did not care about such things at all.

Anita's quote demonstrates that she now considers her lack of education as a serious impediment to her ability to support her family. The economic circumstances of many families at the time prevented many boys from attending school as well. Karan Shrestha, who is almost 40, remembers the early days of Bhumi, as he attended the school for a month. In those days, he recalls, they had to pay Rs 5 a month as fees to support the school. However, his father did not have any source of income and they relied on subsistence farming to make ends meet. Even Rs 5 was a lot of money for them, and Karan could not pay his fees. Karan

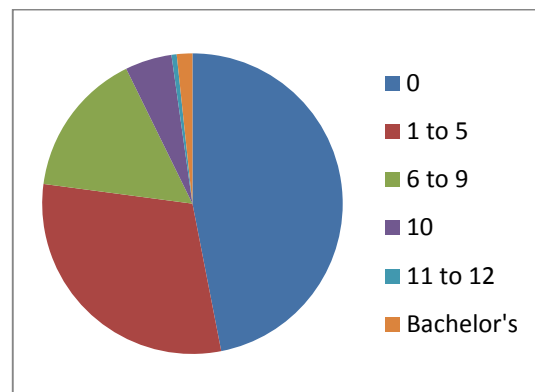
said that the headmaster would be critical of those who did not contribute to the school in those early years. He felt he had no choice but to drop out, even though he regrets doing so now. He spent many years working the small plot of land his family owned, until he was able to get what he called “a small job” as a bus helper for a travel company. This trajectory of some engagement with the school system followed by a withdrawal and active participation in the informal economy emerged as the dominant narrative for most men in Dadagaun.

The [public] school system has penetrated into even rural areas in recent years, but school enrolment and attendance were very low in Nepal until the last few decades for these reasons. Dadagaun was no different, and the educational level of the older generation reflects the history of low levels of education in Nepal’s rural areas.⁵⁸

Table 4 Dadagaun villagers over 30 years and their educational levels

Pie Chart 1 Dadagaun villagers over 30 years and their educational levels

Schooling	Male	Female	Total
0	26	58	84
1 to 5	32	22	54
6 to 9	22	6	28
10	6	3	9
11 to 12	1	0	1
Bachelor’s	1	2	3
Total	88	91	179

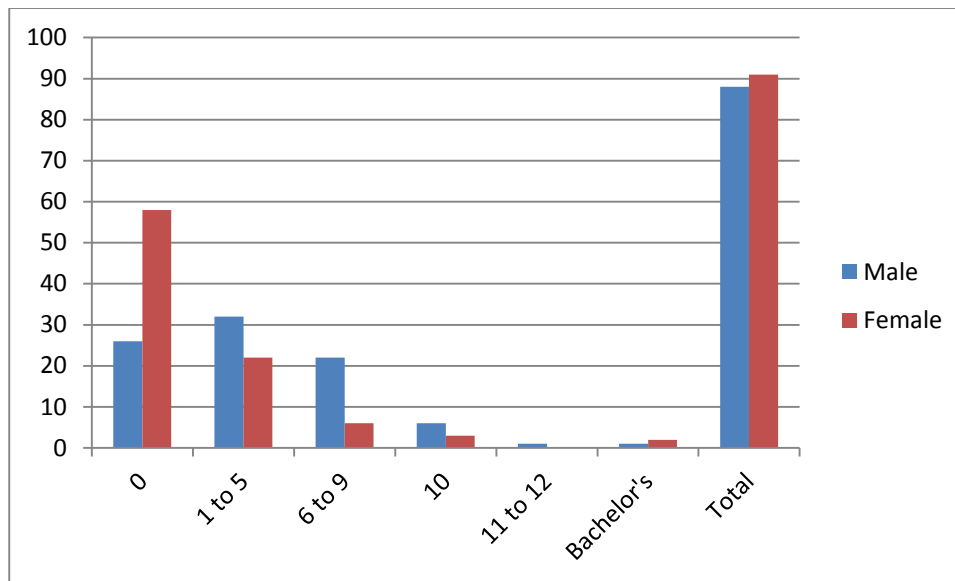


The pie chart demonstrates that almost half of all Dadagaun adults did not attend even a single year of school. More than 80% of adults did not continue beyond primary schooling. Only 13 Dadagaun villagers passed the SLC, with four of them going on to pursue higher education.

The gender disparity is evident in these findings.

⁵⁸ For the purposes of this thesis, I have divided Dadagaun villagers into three groups. Members of the first group are under the age of 20, and are almost entirely involved in formal schooling. Members of the second group are between the ages of 20 and 30, and they are balancing their options between education and employment. Those in the third group, who are the focus of this section, are over 30 years old and are no longer pursuing formal education (with some rare exceptions).

Bar Graph 1 Education level by gender



As the bar graph shows, almost two thirds of all Dadagaun women never went to school. Women trailed men at all but one level of education, often substantially.

a. Education for differentiation

Although most people were unable to pursue higher education for various reasons, those who received even a few years of schooling were able to differentiate themselves socially and economically to carve a space for their advancement. Arun Tamang, who is in his early 50s, was one of the first people to pass the SLC from the village. He was determined to continue his studies, and although he faced challenges similar to the others, he persevered to remain in school. It helped that he was considered a good student, so his family supported him despite their poverty. He was awarded a small scholarship at a government school because of his academic achievement, ensuring that he could continue his schooling. He expected to pass the SLC in First Division, but ended up failing English. He passed the subject at his second attempt in three months, but claimed that the failure affected him. He enrolled in college but did not receive any scholarship after 10th grade, so decided to drop out to pursue employment opportunities.

Arun grew up at a time when very few people had access to education, particularly in rural areas.

It was a really big thing to pass the SLC. Even though I passed in second division, it helped me become somebody. I took the *Lok Sewa* (Civil Service) exam and passed, although only for a temporary position. I worked as a vaccinator in health posts in

rural areas in Eastern Nepal. They taught me how to give injections, and I would go to remote, hilly parts of the country. I also learned to fix wiring and do some electric work, but my job was temporary and they told me it is over in 1998. I moved back to the village (Dadagaun) after that. (01/11/2012)

Even a few years of schooling thus provided Arun the opportunity to secure a temporary government job and live and travel extensively outside the village. After returning to the village, Arun has become the de facto health assistant in Dadagaun. His experience of working in health posts has enabled him to be recognized as an informal doctor, and many villagers refer to him first when they need to deal with small wounds or ailments. Arun is realistic and humble about this position, as he is aware that he is not qualified to act as a medical professional. He earns a small side income through these treatments, in addition to his earnings from agriculture and livestock farming, but he tells villagers to visit the nearest health post [about an hour's walk away] or a hospital [about an hour and a half away] if they have serious medical problems.

The value of education is not limited only to individual examples but can also be demonstrated through the leadership structure and decision-making within the *guthi*, a key village institution which plays a central role in Dadagaun.⁵⁹ This analysis will provide a unique perspective into village life there, and I will present a couple of examples to demonstrate the role of formal schooling in its functioning, and by implication the management of village affairs.

The *guthi* in Dadagaun appears to be an adaptation of the Newars' *guthi* institution. In the past, the one *guthi* to which every Newar household belonged was the death *guthi* or *si guthi* (Gellner 1992). *Guthi* refers to two different, though historically linked, things: 1) a form of land tenure under which land donated for religious purposes was tax-free, and 2) different types of socio-religious organizations to conduct death rituals, annual worship of particular gods, and other such activities.

The *guthi* in Dadagaun includes all four caste groups from the village. The committee and the participants are diverse, and they meet on the first Saturday of each Nepali month. There are two women in the committee, and about one fourth of the participants were usually women in these meetings. During the meeting, each household would pay a membership fee of Rs 30, which went towards the *guthi* fund, used for communal purposes. When a villager

⁵⁹ Some of my analysis concerning the *guthi* in Dadagaun has been published in Republica, a leading English daily, in Nepal: http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=38515

dies, all members contribute four *maana* of rice (almost 2 kilogram) and Rs 10 towards the bereaved family, and the *guthi* provides additional money (Rs 5000). These contributions provide some respite to grieving families simultaneously facing the emotional and economic brunt of the funeral.

The role of the *guthi* has evolved over the years to become a social institution concerned with the development of the village. For example, faced with an emergency when an elderly lady fell ill late at night one day and had to be rushed to the hospital on a heavy, broken stretcher, the *guthi* decided to buy a lighter, aluminium stretcher for the village. Similarly, since most families in Dadagaun cannot afford to buy their own decorations and large utensils to host feasts, ceremonies, and festivals, the *guthi* has also bought and kept a stock of such public goods. The government's water distribution system has not reached Dadagaun, so the *guthi* manages the water supply by collecting Rs 50 each from households and distributing water through communal taps interspersed throughout the village.

In recent times, the *guthi* has also petitioned the Village Development Committee to build plastered and tarmac roads from the capital to the village. The village had to pledge 20% of the budget in the form of labour donation (*shraam daan*) and the *guthi* took charge of work division for each household. After successfully completing plaster work on 25 meters of the steepest road over the summer of 2012, the *guthi* was able to attract further funding to lay tarmac on another 147 metres. The *guthi* divided the work and assigned it to separate committees; it also devised and enforced rules and regulations concerning the use of the road during and after its construction.

These initiatives illustrate the central leadership role the *guthi* plays in the social fabric of the village. Unlike traditional Newar *guthis* where responsibilities rotate down the list by seniority, the committee in Dadagaun is selected based on consensus. The leadership of the *guthi* is diverse, and although the chairman is over 60 years old, the rest of the committee is led by younger villagers (between 30 and 50 years old). Although the *guthi* has a provision to replace committee members who are not active, such a need did not arise during my stay in the village. In any case, all committee members were expected to attend all the meetings, and were central to setting the development priorities for the village. While a member from each household was expected to attend these monthly meetings, less than half the households would usually be present for discussions. With the exception of the two women in the committee, these meetings were largely the domain of men, although numerous

women and children made brief visits to pay their *guthi* and water dues. The lack of active female participation reflected the overarching political economy of the village that was largely patriarchal, with women expected to perform the bulk of household work (see chapter eight). However, this is not to suggest that women had no say in this space. When the *guthi* contemplated sanctioning a family for not sending a representative [as donation of labour] during road construction, for instance, it was the wife of the household who delivered a passionate defence based on the lack of proper advertisement of the requirements:

I did not even know when it was, or when the *mikeing* (loudspeaker announcements) happened, or where the notices were. I don't frequent shops [where the notices were posted] anyway. If you want to fine my family then we have no choice but to pay, but that is not fair. Yes, those that know and still don't come should be fined. This is for our own development, so if we need signatures, I would have brought the whole family, all three of us...and we would have signed. Why would I not do that, when I live close by? (05/19/2012)

The soft power that the Secretary could wield in such situations demonstrated the role of education in the functioning of the *guthi*. At the most obvious level, each *guthi* meeting had to be recorded for administrative purposes, so literacy was a key requirement for the position of Secretary. The meeting followed standard protocols, so all discussions and decisions were noted and verified by participants through signatures, and ratified at the next meeting. At this instance, the Secretary claimed that he could no longer find the list where he had noted down those households that would be rebuked for their failure to contribute labour to the road construction. The Secretary had earlier shown reluctance in punishing these households in this instance, preferring instead to send a strong warning to all families. Although many in attendance felt that a stronger stance was necessary to ensure that the *guthi's* rules and regulations were observed, this fateful disappearance of the list meant that they had no option but to accept the Secretary's suggestion.

The committee maintains a written list of due payments and water fees. Uma Thapa Magar is the only woman over the age of 30 with a higher education degree in the village. She credited her educational background as the main reason for her prominent position in the *guthi* and the village. It was predominantly the women who paid the water dues for their households, and usually deposited their money with Uma. She represented the position of women in these meetings, and was often deputised to maintain minutes for the group.

Uma is currently pursuing a Bachelor's degree while also teaching as an Early Childhood Development (ECD) pre-primary teacher. Teachers enjoy considerable prestige in

the village, and Uma was held in high regard because she has been teaching for over a decade.⁶⁰ She began by volunteering at the local school, and was paid less than Rs 1000 a month, usually sourced through private funds collected from the village. When even these funds dried up, she had to stop teaching for a while. She was then hired to teach through an adult literacy programme, although her salary remained very low.

I was getting paid Rs. 1000 a month to teach women. About 35 enrolled but about 25 were regular over time. The class was usually for six months, two hours a day (6 to 8 pm). Only once one man came for a day, but he was shy, so it was only women who got that [adult literacy classes]. At least women learned to read and write, and could speak up when they met someone new. Otherwise they were always scared and could not say anything to anyone. (07/11/2012)

Uma thus assumed a senior position as a teacher even among her peers. As the quote demonstrates, her role had a direct impact on gender relations and educational outcomes, as many women without traditional schooling got the opportunity to gain literacy skills in the village. Uma has now been chosen as the leader to revive the local Mother's Association, which had become defunct in recent years. Further, Uma's higher education degree has helped establish her as a leader among her age cohort, and her comments show that she has been able to use her skills to provide literacy to empower other women in the village.

While those with even a few years of schooling were able to establish themselves in their community, those who were unable to pursue education for various reasons blamed their lack of education for their poverty. Luna Tamang, a 42-year-old mother of three who never went to school and is illiterate, described why she wants her children to be educated:

If I had studied, I think I would have become someone. I would have become a good person, I think. At that time, if I had studied even [up to] 5-6 class, I think I would have been able to help others. I would build my village infrastructure and help people. I want to but I cannot now. My heart wishes good things but I am not capable enough.

Now, I want to educate my girls. Maili [her middle daughter] does not study at all, and has been held back in school for the last two years. I want my children to have a different life, so I tell them how hard my life is now. They see it every day, but I tell them how I want them to be successful instead of poor like me. Sometimes we don't even have enough to eat, so I want them to live differently. I want to educate them as much as possible. I don't know how to educate them because I am poor, but so far the gods have taken care of me one way or another, so it will be fine. (30/10/201)

⁶⁰ I can attest to this deferential treatment based on the response I received when villagers found out that I was also teaching at Bhumi. While villagers were curious about my role as researcher in the village, I found that they warmed up to me quickly when they found that I was also teaching at the local school.

Her quote about wanting her children to go to school thus captures a narrative about her own life, as she believes her lack of education has kept her poor. Her views are representative of the vast majority of parents in Dadagaun, as they want their children to continue with their education, with the expectation that they will ultimately escape their poverty. Almost every villager without formal schooling narrated a specific context behind their failure to pursue formal school in their youth. For instance, Krishna Bahadur Pathak, a 57 year old former shopkeeper, remembers:

My mother had to work as a labourer to feed us. The only school was in Salleghari [more than three hour's walk away], so the poor could not study because it would be too expensive to get there. There was no school nearby so we could not study. This made a big difference, because without education they [people] cheat you. Once, when we sold two *ropani* land (about 510 square meters), they took five *ropani*. But now, at least my family is educated, my sons are studying [in school], so it is not so bad. (17/10/2012)

Being educated was thus seen as a way to defend oneself from being cheated by 'bad people', as Crivello (2009) also argues in the rural Peruvian context. Krishna was frustrated about his own situation but he felt relieved that his children would have a different life. Pushkar Rana Magar, a 47-year-old father of four, shared a similar story.

Maybe if I had studied, maybe I would have gotten a job. But no schooling, so who knows. At the time [when I was growing up], there was no one at home, otherwise maybe I would have studied. I only had my father, my mother died but I don't even remember that. I did not even get to drink her milk, so it is hard...I get very sick and cannot even work now. I somehow got a job to work at a petrol station, but the smart people would cheat the pump owners by stealing money for every litre sold. When the owners found out, they blamed us and deducted our pay. Illiterate, uneducated people like us could not say anything so we had to suffer in silence. 16/10/2012

Once again, it is clear that Dadagaun villagers felt that their lack of education left them vulnerable to abuse by others. The story that emerged was thus one of hopelessness. These quotes also hint at a different kind of childhood in the past, where they assumed serious household responsibilities at a young age. The stories of Jyoti, Anita, and Karan, recounted in an earlier section, as well as those of Luna, Krishna, and Pushkar represent the mood of the older cohort in the village, who faced different realities that required them to work to earn their livelihoods from a young age. The lack of availability of affordable schools in the vicinity further limited their education opportunities, which in any case were not considered to be immediate priorities at the time.

The experiences of the older cohort have directly influenced their decisions for their children. The success of others with even a few years of schooling coupled with their own frustration with their economic status has meant that villagers are adamant about the need to send their children to school. The emergence of Bhumi as a viable, free school within commuting distance has made it possible for even the poorest of the poor to send their children to school. Luna further articulated this thought:

I like it [Bhumi] a lot. I would like to help the school as much as I can, but I haven't been able to do so yet. They have helped the kids a lot. All the parents have gotten something from it. Even poor students get free education now, but we need to do something to try to help the school too. Without them, our children would not be able to get educated. (30/10/201)

The parents thus feel that they have benefited directly from the school's ability to teach their children. Under these circumstances, the combination of the availability of a public school and parent desire to send children to school has thus provided the impetus for mass schooling in the region.

III. Dadagaun Education: The Here and Now

A powerful demonstration of Dadagaun's acceptance of the norm of education is the high enrolment rate of the current generation of school age children in formal schooling. Current trends from Dadagaun show that school enrolment for children under the age of 16 is 100%. A strong norm has taken hold that schooling is an integral part of growing up, and this norm appears to have been entirely adopted by the village, regardless of caste, class, or gender.

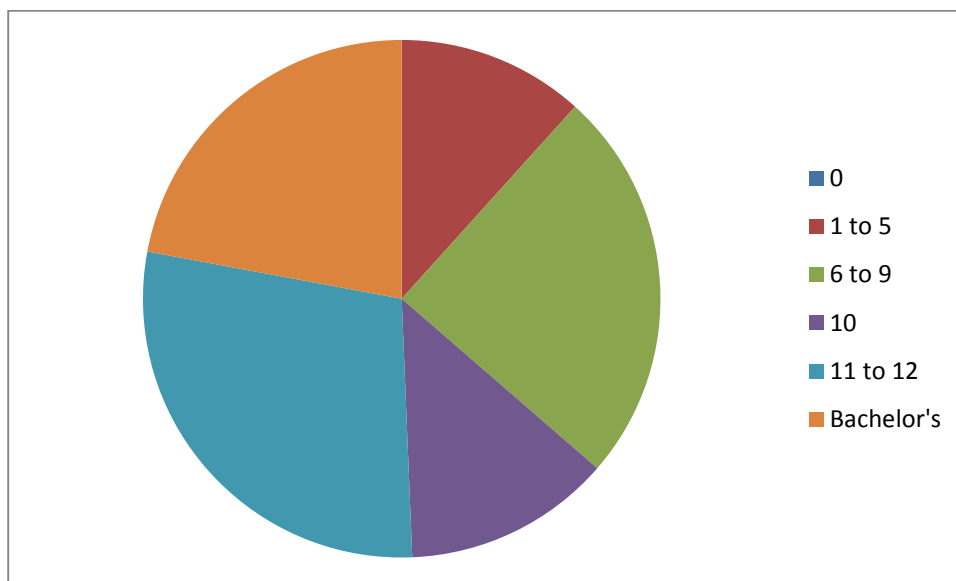
The entrenchment of formal schooling is not a momentary change but is demonstrable over time in recent years. The findings for formal schooling for Dadagaun villagers between 20 to 30 years old illustrate the continued primacy of the pursuit of education.

Table 5 Dadagaun residents (20-30 years) and their educational levels

Schooling	Male	Female	Total
0	0	0	0
1 to 5	2	7	9
6 to 9	12	7	19
10	7	3	10
11 to 12	14	8	22
Bachelor's	10	7	17
Total	45	32	77

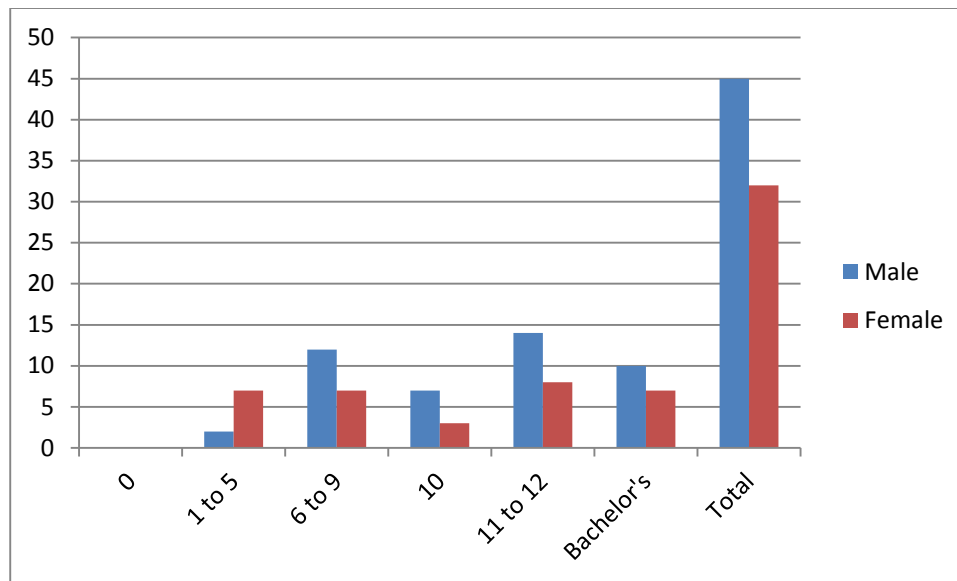
As the table shows, all Dadagaun residents between the age of 20 and 30 have received at least one year of schooling. Although 9 villagers have not studied past primary schooling, almost two-third of that age group (63%) have continued to pursue at least secondary schooling (SLC or above).

Pie Chart 2 Different education levels of Dadagaun residents (20-30 years)



The pie chart demonstrates that half the population continued to pursue higher education beyond the SLC, while the corresponding figure was less than 3 percent for those over the age of 30 in the village. The difference in formal schooling between the two cohorts reflects vast improvements in accessing and experiencing higher education for those between 20 and 30 years old, compared to those over the age of 30.

Bar Graph 2 Education levels of Dadagaun residents (20-30 years) by gender



The bar graph demonstrates subtle gender differences even within the 20-30 year old age cohort. More girls than boys stopped going to school after primary school, but more boys than girls were enrolled in further education at each subsequent level.⁶¹ This is consistent with findings at the national level.⁶² In higher education, for instance, of the students pursuing Bachelor's and Master's degrees in 2006/07 at Tribhuvan University, the central University of Nepal, 62.3% are male while only 37.7% are female (Bhatta et al. 2008: 9).⁶³ These disparities are not exceptions but merely reflections of the inequalities pervasive in primary and secondary education.

Education access appears to be largely unaffected by ethnicity, as the next table demonstrates.

⁶¹ Note that there were a lot more boys than girls in this age cohort, perhaps because some girls from Dadagaun families have gotten married and are no longer in the village. While constructing the village map and aggregating data for various households as well as interviewing parents, I found that most villagers would only account for those family members who lived in their homes in Dadagaun. If some children did not live permanently at home, while sons were often recognised as family members who were away, married daughters were acknowledged as family members by only a couple of families in the entire village.

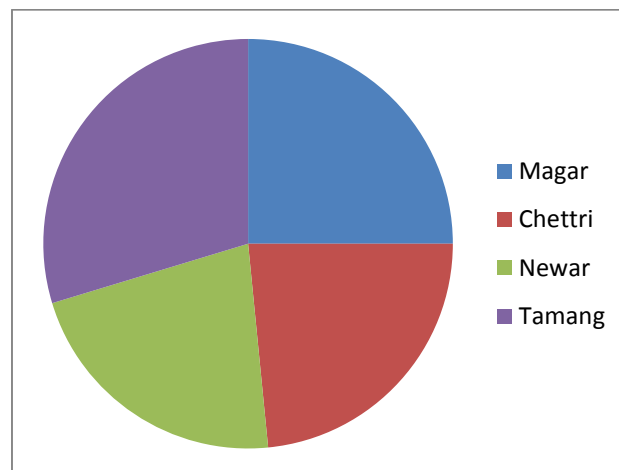
⁶² This pattern has been well established in the literature, and in Nepal can be traced to a number of reasons, including girls having to share a greater burden of household work, having to marry at a young age, and leaving their maternal home after marriage. I will discuss these issues in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

⁶³ See Bhatta et al. 2008 for a more comprehensive breakdown of higher education outcomes by gender, caste, class, geography, and faculty.

Table 6 Higher education status by ethnicity

Ethnicity	Those with higher education (E)	Total Population (TP)	Proportion of educated within each ethnic group (E/TP*100)
Magar	16	63	25.40
Chhetri	15	78	19.23
Newar	14	59	23.73
Tamang	19	81	23.46
Total	64	281	22.78

Pie Chart 3 Higher Education Status by Ethnicity



The overall picture demonstrates that ethnicity alone has not been a major determinant of access to higher education. Since a student is expected to complete their secondary schooling when they are 16 or 17 years old, I assessed the status of higher education among Dadagaun residents over the age of 17. Between 20 to 25 percent of each ethnic group has continued to pursue higher education beyond secondary schooling, with the village average at about 23%. Incidentally, Chhetris, the supposedly ‘high-caste’ group, were the only group with less than 20% of their population pursuing higher education. Magars, Tamangs, and Newars, all classified as indigenous groups, have a comparable proportion of population with higher education. This is not to suggest that caste has to be entirely irrelevant, but in this context where most people in Dadagaun are extremely poor, caste identities appear to have little impact on their pursuit of education, implying that economic status may be more important than social status in this context.

IV. Children in Dadagaun: Lived Experiences

The findings in the previous section paint a comprehensive picture of the progress in education pursuit in Dadagaun. The experiences of three current Bhumi students demonstrate the sacrifices they make and the circumstances under which they pursue their schooling, illustrating further the value Dadagaun residents now place on education. This section is the first step towards deconstructing the dominant myth of a linear transition trajectory from childhood and schooling to employment and adulthood (Lloyd 2005).

Sandesh Tamang is 13 years old, and he is currently in 7th grade at Bhumi. He is the youngest of three sons, all of whom attend Bhumi. Sandesh was one of several children who kept me company during the steep walk to school each day. On May 30, 2012, I was talking to Sandesh about his daily schedule when he mentioned that he woke up at 5 that morning to sell firewood in the nearest town. He accompanies his mother and some other villagers, all of whom carry a load of firewood on their backs as they walk about an hour downhill to the town. Before the preponderance of land sale and foreign employment, which I discuss in previous and later chapters, most of the village relied on selling firewood to make ends meet, and many poor families continue to depend on the forest for their livelihood.

After making the long, often slippery, downhill trip, Sandesh and his mother look for customers for their firewood. Over the years, they have established a network of customer households, so they do not have to worry about selling their load. Each load sells for Rs 115. Sandesh gets to keep Rs 15 for his daily snack allowance while the remaining Rs 100 goes towards supporting his family (although he beams that he sometimes gets to save the remaining money in his piggybank). Sandesh is thus already a financially contributing member of the family.

There is an obvious opportunity cost to Sandesh's income. The uphill trip back to the village takes about two hours. He goes down to the city about four times a week, and by the time he returns home, he has to get ready to rush to school. The entire trip to sell firewood can take up to four hours, so Sandesh has been up for about five hours before he even begins school. In addition, he said he would often not have enough time to eat lunch. He said he would sometimes get to eat a packet of biscuit while in town, and he also had some spending money for an afternoon snack, but it appeared that he would not get a meal for over 12 hours. This is the norm rather than the exception, as almost 40% of all Bhumi students cannot afford to eat anything while at school. The role of food and nutrition intake to facilitate better school

outcomes has been well established (see, for instance, Sridhar 2008), but it is clear that Sandesh, and many of his peers, are unable to meet these standards.

In addition to his early morning duties at home, Sandesh is expected to help with housework in the evenings. The most time consuming work involves queuing and fetching water multiple times from one of several communal village taps to meet the needs of the family. Other duties range from cooking meals to tending to livestock, but on average he spends about three hours each evening on household chores. Schooling is now a central part of his childhood, but he still has to carry out the same kind of work that many in the older cohort had described as having been key impediments to their own schooling. He shoulders a number of crucial responsibilities within his household, even as his parents are supportive and encouraging of his educational pursuits. The circumstances he faces growing up dictate that he supplement his role as a child and a student with the needs of his family.

Ravi Tamang has to balance his school and work life in a similar way. He was born in Rumauli but he grew up in his maternal uncle's house in Dadagaun. His family (his parents and his elder brother Sagun) decided to leave their village to move to Dadagaun because the nearest primary school was two hours away and the secondary school was four hours away from their village, making it difficult for them to attend school. The family's decision to uproot their family to facilitate their children's schooling demonstrates the high value they place on education.

Ravi is 13 now, and currently studying in 7th grade at Bhumi. However, he also works as domestic help. When Ravi's family moved to Dadagaun, it was easy for him to get to the local school. For the first few years, Ravi and Sagun could focus on school while their mother took care of most household chores. However, when their uncle got married, there were some disagreements with the new aunt, and so Ravi's parents decided to rent a small room in Kathmandu and move there. They could not afford to take the children with them, so the children continued to live at the uncle's house.

The transition from nephews to domestic workers was immediate. With their mother no longer doing the house work, their aunt expected Sagun and Ravi to take over. Ravi would wake up early and fill up and carry four drums of water from the village tap. He is a small boy and so struggled with the heavy drums but it soon became second nature to him. Next, he would take the goats to graze in the pastures. He was also expected to cut grass for the cattle at home. He returned around 7 in the morning to prepare and cook lunch. With only one mud

hearth to contend with, it would take him at least a couple of hours to make the simple ‘rice, lentils, and potatoes’ meal each day. After serving the food to everyone in the family, he would quickly eat his own share, do all the dishes, and then run to school. He was almost always late, but the teachers were aware of his situation at home and so they made exceptions for him.

After school, he would get back home and start working again. He had to take the animals to graze, bring water, chop firewood, clean the house, and do any other work that needed to be done. He then cooked meals for the family and cleaned up after them. When he was done, he would have spent about 15 hours each day either working or at school, leaving him exhausted.

Most teachers at Ravi’s school agree that he is a bright student with potential, but the family dynamics took a toll on his performance.

He is smart...very sharp. He can also get angry very easily, but it is because the house where he stays...he doesn’t get treated well. His parents live in the city but they say they can’t take him, so he is left here but he cannot focus on his studies. He can perform in the right environment, but it is difficult now.

Class teacher, August 8, 2012

The maternal aunt cared only about getting them to do all the work at home. The family would be happy if he were working, but at all other times, even if he took a breather for a minute, they would be angry at him. He was regularly expected to miss school when there was extra work at home.

Ravi had been promised that if he lived with the maternal uncle’s family and did the work, they would provide for his education. Although he attended a free public school, he sometimes needed money to meet the costs of some associated expenses. The relatives paid for these to begin with, but slowly began to pull back on their commitment. He did not get any snacks to take to school either, so he would be hungry for most of the day. He was often singled out for not wearing the right uniform or shoes to school, and although the teachers were considerate, he felt bad about being in such a situation. As the resources began drying up and the home environment soured, Ravi began to lose interest in his education.

The family ultimately decided that they could no longer support both nephews, and announced that they would only send one of them to school. Since Sagun was already in 9th grade, they decided to continue his education, which meant that Ravi could no longer go to

school. If it were only about the money, the teachers at the school would have been willing to help, but the family wanted someone to work at home as well. Eventually, the aunt decided that they would not send even Sagun to school. Instead, it was decided that both of them would be sent back to Rumauli to live with relatives there and work in the fields.

The brothers had no say in the decision, and were preparing to leave. They were happy that they did not have to endure the emotional mistreatment any more, but were sad to be quitting school and leaving the life they knew. However, by chance, Ravi had just started helping a neighbour with building a wall for his house. When the neighbour found out that he was being effectively banished, he offered Ravi a home as long as he helped out.

Ravi's workload has decreased significantly now, but he is finding that the promise to support his education is not being fulfilled. He goes to school regularly, but he does not have the shoes and the bag he needs. At school, the teachers have noticed the scars from home. He does get into some trouble, but scolding him agitates him further and he reacts aggressively. A few kind words are often enough to make him understand his mistakes (Ananta, 08/08/2011).

The absence of his parents has made things difficult for Ravi, as he is unable to rely on them to meet his needs. Even when he goes to the city to meet them and ask for money to buy various things, his parents are unable to support him. As a result, Ravi's only option is to work for others in the village so that he has a shelter. He goes to school, but once again he is caught in a fine balancing act between education and work, which has affected his schooling outcomes.

Some of the children not only work at their own homes or the homes of others but are also in paid employment. Suniti and Dhiraj are siblings, and they work with the rest of their family in the brick industry.⁶⁴ Suniti is almost 14 years old, and is currently in 5th grade. She is proud that her roll number, which reflects her class rank, is 4, and that she has never failed an exam. The achievement is all the more remarkable given her work outside school hours.

Suniti has been making bricks since she was 9 years old. For about six months in the winter season, when the threat of rain is minimal, Suniti wakes up at 3 a.m. and, with her father and brother, goes to the fields to make bricks. She works from 3 a.m. to about 8 a.m. before rushing home for a quick lunch and then heading to school. After spending the next

⁶⁴ Note that Suniti's family live in a neighbouring community but she attends Bhumi.

seven hours in class, she heads straight to the fields, working from around 5 to 7 p.m. The mornings are spent making the bricks while the evenings are devoted to piling and storing them. She returns home for dinner after work, and tries to finish her homework as soon as possible so that she can get some sleep before the next dawn wakes her. The cycle continues.

One of Suniti's relatives had worked in the brick industry before, and had recruited her father to work there. He moved from Bara district for this work, but he soon brought his family to Lalitpur because he could not complete the work himself. Suniti says she works because she wants to continue with her schooling.

I am from a big family. There are seven people in my family, and my parents have no other jobs. If my father were to work alone, we would not have any money. It would not be enough for us to even eat, so then we cannot go to school either. (26/08/2012)

If she had a choice, Suniti would quit work in no time. She does not like the work at all, especially because she has to wake up early and work long hours under extremely hazardous conditions. There is a lot of dust and pollution around their workplace, and it is extremely cold.

My hands get frozen in the mornings. I don't have gloves or shoes or masks. We inhale so much dust when making the bricks. I get very tired, and I have cried many times because it is so cold and I am so tired.

Dhiraj is only a few years older than Suniti, and he has faced a similar trajectory in the brick industry. Despite having to work a lot to make ends meet, he recalls how his father insisted that he continue his education. He is similarly frustrated with his work but well aware of the need to contribute to support his family.

I used to come first or second but now I have gone down to fourth, and I will probably do even worse next year. I don't have enough time to do my homework because I have to make sure that my family gets to eat every day. My sister works very hard as well, and I feel sad that we are so poor. We have no choice...what can we do? My father wants me to focus on my studies and he has told me not to work for the next two years because of my SLC, so I will probably stop working soon, but I know it will make things difficult at home. (28/08/2012)

Their plight thus demonstrates the difficult circumstances under which they attend school, and exemplifies the sacrifices they are willing to make for the sake of their education. Dhiraj claims that the difficulties in navigating these horizontal transitions between home, school, and work are having a direct impact on his ability to perform well and progress within the school system. These findings are in contrast to Alpa Shah's (2006) depictions of tribals working in brick kilns. Shah writes of seasonal migrants from Jharkhand working at brick

kilns in Bihar and interprets their movement as a temporary space of freedom to escape problems back home, explore a new country, gain independence from parents, or live out prohibited amorous relationships. In the Bhumi context, these brick kiln workers felt compelled to work there to make ends meet, and they would happily quit work if they had other means to support themselves.

Taken together, the experiences of Sandesh, Ravi, and Suniti demonstrate the range of work activities that school-age children carry out on a daily basis. These experiences are not the exceptions but norms for Bhumi students.⁶⁵ In households (like Sandesh's) with only sons, the boys are still expected to fulfil household chores.⁶⁶ These findings are also consistent with the national picture: in Nepal, about 3.14 million out of 7.7 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 are economically active (ILO/CBS 2011). Nearly 40% of working children work up to 14 hours a week, whereas 36% work from 15 to 28 hours and about 15% work from 29 to 42 hours. About 10% of working children spend more than 42 hours a week on economic activities. The experiences of Dadagaun children are thus changing over time to accommodate formal schooling, even as they are expected to continue to support their families in various ways.

The debates on children and work predominantly focus on the harmful impact of work on schooling, of which there are many (IPEC-ILO 2012, Bachman 2000), but this research also shows that often children are forced to work even to continue with their schooling. Consistent with Bourdillon's (2009) findings in Zimbabwe and beyond, children can often face serious difficulties if they are employed: hazardous tasks, abusive treatment, and lack of schooling opportunities. However, as he further argues, the particular constraints that many poor children face also require them to pursue employment, as it would be impossible for many of these children to attend schools without their supplementary income.

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I pursued an inter-generational analysis of education experiences to show how people's aspirations and expectations have evolved over the years. Education's role as a tool for differentiation in the past has directly fuelled people's current aspirations from education as a vehicle for upward mobility. As a result, formal schooling has now

⁶⁵ In fact, similar trends have been reported from around the world. As an example, Samantha Punch (2001) argues that children in rural Bolivia often do a bulk of the household work. They are central to the household economy and are expected to make a direct contribution to their families.

⁶⁶ The chapter on employment explores this theme further, arguing that in families with both sons and daughters, the daughters are expected to assume a larger share of household work.

become a dominant part of children's lives, irrespective of caste, class, gender, or geography. The expectation of a linear transition from childhood to adulthood does not hold though, as school-age children are forced to balance their school and work lives. The dominant life-stages model assumes that distinct categories mark peoples transitions, with children expected to attend school and get educated, after which they get employed, perhaps get married, and assume so-called adult responsibilities. However, I have argued that these delineations are not as clear cut, as children take up adult roles and contribute directly towards the livelihoods of their families. As they pursue these vertical transitions from one 'stage' to the next, they are thus also constantly balancing various horizontal transitions between school, work, and home. The success with which they are able to continue with their education is thus often dependent on how they navigate these multiple transitions at any given time. Their transition to employment is then not dependent on completing their schooling degrees or 'coming of age' alone either.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ In chapter eight, I critique this model further, showing how those that appear to have transitioned to becoming 'adults' face serious challenges with employment and are unable to meet the expectations placed on them.

6. Positive Deviance: ‘Success’ in Unexpected Places

I. Introduction

Building on people’s aspirations and expectations from education discussed in the last chapter, the next two chapters focus on the educational experiences of Dadagaun residents and Bhumi students. I focus on the role of schooling as a socializing institution by analyzing the experiences of Bhumi students. The relative success of Bhumi raises questions about what constitutes success, how school quality is determined, and whether the graduates are prepared to transition successfully to higher education and employment. I also evaluate here the value of credentialing and the evolution of a public school amidst competing pressures from local private schools in the region. The findings of this chapter are based on the analysis of not only the structures of the public school system but also the role of adaptable agents within it.

I examine here the parameters within which Bhumi is seen as a success story, juxtaposing its outcomes with the education landscape in and around constituent villages (section two). I then use the theory of Positive Deviance (PD) to understand the unique circumstances that define Bhumi’s success (section three). The first part of this section acknowledges the positive pedagogical practices at the school whereas the second part emphasizes ‘deviant’ behaviour that facilitates the manipulation of an otherwise defunct system for better education delivery. Next, I draw out the implications of these findings, including demonstrating how the school has become a victim of its own success in some ways (section four).

II. School Success

The public school system in Nepal faces serious challenges but Bhumi has been able to lay the groundwork to become a successful education provider in the region. This success is all the more remarkable because of the school’s isolated location as well as the significant socio-economic challenges that its students and their families face. In this section, I examine the school’s current activities to illustrate the reasons behind Bhumi’s recognition as a success story.

a. Survival and Expansion

The generic challenges that public schools face include problems with access, resources, accountability, and holistic enabling environment. The emphasis on English as the medium of instruction, reliance on a business model of payment for accountability, and the

nexus of more engaged parents, students, and teachers in private schools (Caddell 2006) ultimately threatens the future of public schools (Kantipur 2013). Thirty-three out of 639 public schools (5%) have closed down in Kathmandu Valley alone between 2010 and 2012 (ibid.; MoE 2012). Bhumi is at the periphery of the Valley, and is not immune to these challenges. Three primary and secondary schools within a twenty minute radius of Bhumi have closed in the last decade alone. As such, Bhumi's mere survival can be seen as a weak indicator of success.

Bhumi has not only survived, however, but has also been able to expand its operations. One of the primary schools that closed in the region has now become Bhumi's Block B, so those students have become absorbed into Bhumi. The basic Block B infrastructure, as well as the core of the teaching staff, remains unchanged, but the administrative as well as functional structures have now been co-opted completely by Bhumi, with overall responsibility now assumed by the school.

The takeover of Block B was initiated due to demand from the local community of the old school that collapsed, as people were impressed with how Bhumi had been operating. Although the main Bhumi building is only fifteen minutes away, being able to revive this primary school has made a big difference to the community it serves because the hilly terrain would have meant that children as young as three years old would have had to endure a long uphill walk to get to school.

The ease with which this school has been taken over by Bhumi has led to increasing calls for the school to breathe life into the other schools that are no longer operational in the area. School officials are wary, however, because they do not have either the resources or the logistical support from the government to make more acquisitions possible at the moment.

Figure 7 Bhumi Block A and Block B



b. SLC results

The core of the school's success depends on its performance in the SLC exam, considered the 'iron gate' to higher education and employment in Nepal. As Bhatta notes:

If success in the SLC examination opens for students windows of opportunities for higher studies or widens their prospect for employment, failure in this examination greatly narrows their options for self-development. Many people, therefore, take failure in SLC as failure in life. (2005: ii).

The unfortunate but obvious fixation on the SLC is demonstrated by the suicide of at least seven girls who failed to pass the exam in 2012 alone in Nepal (Republica 2012).

Three batches of students have graduated from Bhumi till 2012. It has not only grown into a secondary school but also holds clout in the region because of its unparalleled success in the region.

Table 7 Bhumi’s SLC performance

Year	SLC Candidates	Distinction (>80%)	First Division (>60%)	Second Division (45%-60%)	Third Division (<45%)	Fail (<32/100 in any subject)	Total Pass
2010	16*	0	11	3	0	1	14
2011	15	3	11	1	0	0	15
2012	20	4	15	1	0	0	20

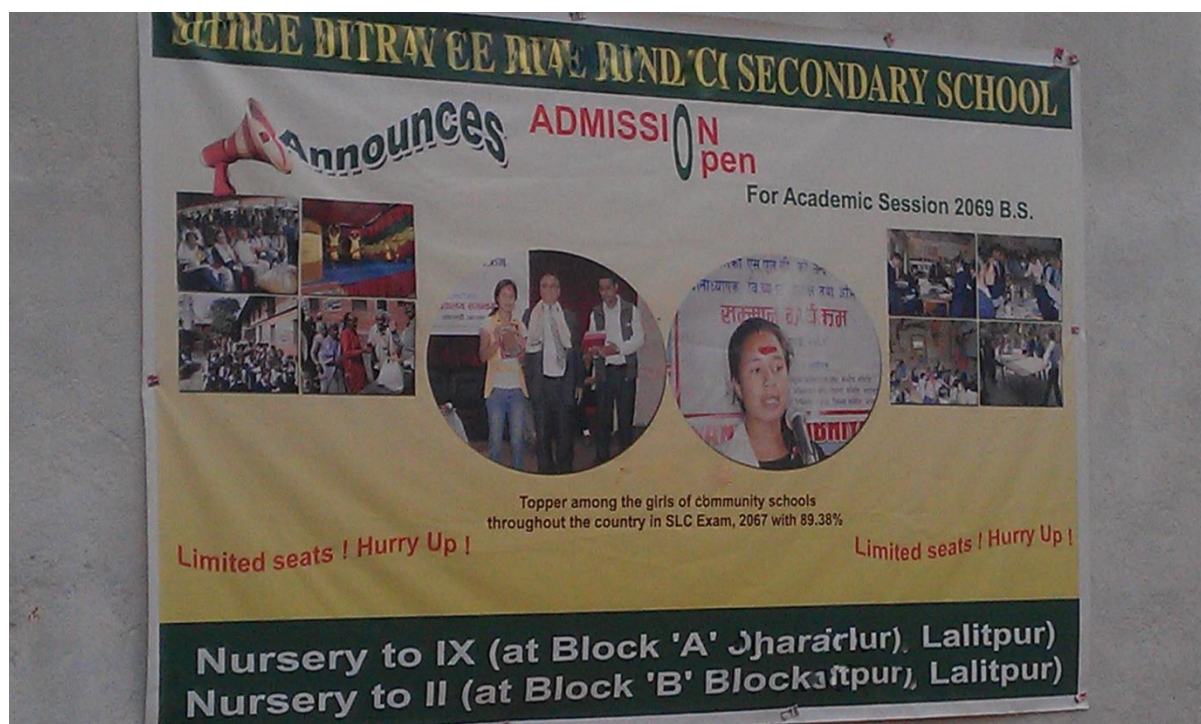
In 2010, the first year that Bhumi students appeared for the SLC, 14 of 16 students passed. One student failed her Mathematics examination,⁶⁸ but she appeared for the complementary exam in three months and passed the same year. The only other person not accounted for above unfortunately passed away because of an unidentified illness right before her final examination. The girl had always achieved the highest marks in her class throughout her schooling career, and the school as well as the villagers had very high hopes from her.⁶⁹

In 2011, 15 students from Bhumi appeared for the SLC, and their performance surpassed Bhumi’s SLC results for 2010. Three students secured Distinctions and only one student had to contend with Second Division. All the students passed at the first attempt. The results from this second year propelled Bhumi into the limelight because of the individual achievement of a particular student. Prativa had secured 89.38%, making her the “Topper among girls of community schools through the country...” The school was able to boast a prestigious national record, bolstering its claim to providing quality education.

⁶⁸ If she had passed, she would have secured first division.

⁶⁹ The death of the star student and dear friend affected the students and their performance considerably.

Figure 8 SLC results as marker of school success



Poster felicitating the successful student and advertising the school. Some identifying information has been blurred.

In 2012, the students were able to collectively outperform the results from previous years. Twenty students appeared for the SLC, and they managed to get four Distinctions, fifteen First Divisions, and only one Second Division. The school thus maintained their 100% pass record from the last year.

In the last three years, then, Bhumi has passed all but one student who appeared for the SLC in the first attempt, with 88% of them securing at least First Division. Girls have performed particularly well, with a girl securing the highest percentage in the SLC in both 2010 and 2011, while a boy and a girl tied for the first position in 2012. Four of the seven Distinctions the school has achieved have been secured by girls. Three of the four Distinction holders in 2012 were from indigenous communities (two Tamangs and a Shrestha), while only one student was a 'high-caste' Chhetri. Although the performance of Dalit students has been very low consistently throughout the country, the three Dalit students who appeared for the SLC in 2012 secured First Divisions comfortably.

These results are especially remarkable given the comparable statistics for public schools, locally and nationally. In 2012, Bhumi was one of only two community schools in

Lalitpur district (64 schools from the district appeared for the SLC) to secure a 100% success rate. At the national level, a mere 47% (208,187 out of 496,028 students) passed the SLC in 2012 (Paudyal, 2012), a decline from the pass rate of 55.5% from the year before (Subedi 2012).

Bhumi’s record compares well even against the results of private school students from the region. Although the sample size is relatively small, the comparison here is consistent with broader discussions in Dadagaun about private and public education. Ten of the twenty students who appeared for the SLC in 2012 from Bhumi were from Dadagaun. All four Distinction holders from Bhumi also happened to be from Dadagaun, while the other six secured First Division. In comparison, of the five students who appeared for the SLC from private schools, only one student secured a Distinction, one student got a First Division, two passed in Second Division, and one student failed. The student who failed did not pass in his second try in three months either.

Table 8 Dadagaun SLC Results

School	Distinction	First Division	Second Division	Third Division	Fail	Total
Bhumi	4	6	0	0	0	10
Private	1	1	2	0	1	5

As parents and villagers considered these results, a lively debate on the quality of education followed in the village. Bhumi’s exam results forced parents to reflect on the pros and cons of sending their children to a private or a public school. For instance, Abhishek Thapa Magar’s youngest son had always wanted to attend Bhumi rather than a private school because most of his friends went there. However, Abhishek had a relatively well-paid job as a driver, so he felt he had to send his child to a private school to “maintain status”. Since his elder daughter and son had attended private schools, he did not want the youngest son to feel that he did not get the same opportunities as his elder siblings. The general perception is that education quality is higher in private schools (Graner 2006, Caddell 2006), and even public schools that perform well need time to prove their worth and competitiveness.

Abhishek’s elder son was only able to secure a second division in the SLC in 2012, despite attending a local private school. Abhishek was not happy with this turn of events, and remarked:

I wasted a lot of time and resources on my children's education in private schools, only to be spat in the face...the teachers never cared about my children the same way the Bhumi school teachers care for theirs, and the results show it. These teachers do not only teach in the school but also come to our village and talk to the parents. What is the point of going to a private school if the results of the free school are better? (09/03/2012)

This quote demonstrates some of the implicit assumptions associated with school quality. There was an expectation that because private schools charged fees, their results would be better than the "free" public school. There was also an appreciation that teachers were central to school outcomes. A general consensus emerged in the village over the next few months that Bhumi was a better school, and Abhishek decided to send the younger son, who was starting 8th grade that year, to Bhumi as well.

This trend in Dadagaun, whereby more and more students, even from private schools, are now choosing to attend Bhumi signifies another marker of Bhumi's recent successes. At the start of the last academic year alone, 72 students switched from other schools to enrol at Bhumi, including 25 students from local private schools. This trend defies national enrolment trajectories that overwhelmingly favour private schools. In the last six months of 2012, fifteen more students transferred mid-year, continually increasing the school size. The most common reason that parents and guardians report for making the switch are the school's SLC performance, which they link to Bhumi's delivery of free quality education. Consequently, the demand for admission to the school is far outstripping the school's resources and capabilities. A representative from a village over an hour's walk away had come to the school to request them to start a bus service so that the village could send about fifty children to Bhumi, but the school did not have the funds to pay for a bus or the infrastructure to accommodate these children. The school is thus unable to expand at the pace at which student demand is increasing.

The school's SLC track record is central to its image as a successful story, and there is no doubt that the school has established itself as a prominent quality education provider in the region.

c. Extra-curricular Achievement

The SLC results have firmly placed Bhumi on the map, but their extra-curricular achievements over the years further cement their position as a quality school in the region.

The school places particular emphasis on other activities that support the all-round development of their students. Every Friday, school ends two hours early (except for 9th and 10th grade students, who are expected to prepare for SLC exams) to host extra-curricular activities at the school. Events range from public speaking and debate competitions to song and dance performances, quizzes, art shows, and spelling contests. The students are divided into four houses, and often compete at different age and class levels. These competitions are also hosted primarily by students as organizers, Masters of Ceremony, judges, and/or scorekeepers, giving them experience and knowledge in diverse settings.

The intra-school participation has borne fruit at the inter-school level as well. Winners from intra-school competitions are regularly selected to represent the school at regional and national competitions. Such engagement outside their immediate surroundings has helped students gain confidence, as they become more aware of life beyond their village and seek to demonstrate their talent beyond the classroom, as I show below.

Some of their recent successes have gone beyond participation. A couple of 9th grade students were selected to represent the school in the NMB Bank Inter-school Heritage Painting Competition, which drew 116 young artists from 69 schools throughout the country (Himalayan News Service 2012). The students had two hours to finish their paintings, after which they were judged by nationally renowned artists. Ranu Tamang, a Bhumi student, shared first prize in the competition, and she was consequently featured by leading national dailies. She was also awarded a cheque for Rs 20,000, which is more than her family's annual income. She immediately became a darling in her school and her village.

Ranu was never considered a good student, and she had failed two subjects (English and Math) in her latest terminal exam. According to her teachers, some of her academic problems stemmed from her family environment. Her father was unemployed and was known for excessive alcohol consumption (Interview with her mother Sarita, 31/10/2012; Conversations with Bhumi teacher Ishwor 13/09/2012). Her mother drank too, but worked on the small plot of land they owned to make ends meet. They were both illiterate, and so unable to help their children with their homework. The family environment was not cordial, with regular arguments between the parents at home, which often spilled into physical violence (Conversations with Bhumi teachers Ishwor, Chitra, and Rupen throughout September 2012 and personal observations on 13/11/2012). Ranu and her brother did not grow up in an enabling environment. According to a teacher,

There are so many problems in her family. The parents quarrel all the time, and are not happy even when we try to help Ranu. They usually discourage her from participating in extra events, and we have to justify everything, sometimes even pleading...If her family background were better, she could achieve so much more. (02/09/2012)

The school recognized her potential as an artist, and continued to encourage her to participate in local and national art competitions. While the mother, who engaged with the school, allowed it, she was not entirely convinced, and often challenged the teachers for taking Ranu's time, and not making it possible for her to carry out household chores. In a school system where exam results are considered to be the only marker of success, extra-curricular activities are rarely valued for their own sake, and are often even considered as unnecessary distractions. Even when Ranu was entered for this competition, as the quote above demonstrates, the art teacher reported that Ranu's family was not happy about her absence from home for the Saturday. The challenge of involving girls in extra-curricular activities outside the school is particularly acute, given the restrictions on their mobility in patriarchal societies.

However, her success in the art competition immediately changed these dynamics. Ranu was thrust into the limelight, and went from being a weak student to a local celebrity. She was featured in Kantipur, the leading Nepali national daily, on September 2, 2012, the day after the competition. The school felicitated her that morning during the school assembly. Her friends, relatives, and villagers acknowledged her positively, and all the children talked about her accomplishments on their walk home for many days. The cash purse she won drew considerable acclaim, and her parents were also very proud of her. Ranu's mother came to the school to thank the teachers the very next day, and was beaming throughout the visit. She said,

Everything is because of the teachers. Usually, I don't even understand [the significance of] their advice. Many times they have said we need to take Ranu away for drawing. We thought it was just a waste of time. [Looks at newspaper with Ranu's picture] Now we are very happy. We listen to the teachers here because they always do what is best for students. (02/09/2012)

Figure 9 A copy of Ranu's prize-winning painting



The parents thus had not engaged directly to support their daughter's talents, but her success following guidance from the teachers made an impression on them. There was a worry at the school that her prize money could be misspent by her parents. The teachers held on to the cheque, and explained to the mother in great detail the need to safeguard these funds for her daughter. The costs of higher education meant that Ranu would face significant challenges continuing her education, but this money afforded her the privilege to dream about getting a degree beyond secondary schooling. To her credit, the mother agreed willingly, and with help from the teachers, set up a bank account to deposit the money in Ranu's name.

Beyond competitions, the school has also formed numerous clubs, such as the Junior Red Cross Circle Club (JRCCC) as well as the Children's Club, which are led primarily by students. These clubs organize fundraising activities and awareness programmes to engage students in social welfare work as well as to prepare them for natural calamities and other emergencies.⁷⁰ Students who volunteer or run these clubs have gained valuable organizational and leadership skills.

⁷⁰ For instance, JRCCC members first received training from the Red Cross and then taught other students in the school how to respond in case of a fire or an earthquake.

The school consciously seeks out extra-curricular opportunities for students, and these avenues provide grounds for success for students beyond the classroom. These activities cost the school money, and require a lot of time and effort on the school's part, but they have been able to manage so far. These successes provide students a sense of recognition and help them pursue their passions further. Such outcomes also provide opportunities for the school to share the limelight, sending a strong message about Bhumi's worth as an education institution.

d. Parent and Community Engagement

A large majority of parents and guardians who send their children to Bhumi are illiterate, and very few of them have any years of schooling. Most of the families come from a socio-economic background where they often struggle to make ends meet, which is why many of them sent their children to public schools in the first place.⁷¹ Against this backdrop, the level of engagement that Bhumi has been able to maintain with the guardians is noteworthy.

Student parades provide a powerful avenue for community engagement. On May 8, the World Red Cross and Red Crescent Day, the JRCCC, supported by the teachers, led a community-wide rally to raise awareness about the club and its activities. As students marched to drum rolls for hours throughout the communities catered by the school, parents and guardians got a demonstration of the school's enthusiasm in action. When the SLC results came out later in the year, the school embarked on another, more joyous rally, this time celebrating the school's success. The rally represented a clear display of triumph across the region, and helped establish a relationship with parents, guardians, and other community members, inviting them to participate in the school's celebrations.

These visits are not limited to special occasions but are backed by regular village trips. A couple of local teachers go up to Dadagaun regularly, particularly on holidays. They walk the length and breadth of the village, stopping to talk to students as well as their parents. Most discussions revolve around not only student performances but also guardians' lives. Most teachers know virtually all the parents, and the personal connections help strengthen

⁷¹ While researching education inequality among rural, low income children and families in Paraguay, Aliah Carolan-Silva (2011) has found that parent involvement in schooling is very limited. To the extent that they are involved beyond sending their children to school, they do so only at the community level but very rarely at the individual level (ibid.: 253). For instance, they would be likely to donate their labour to build school buildings but would not inquire about the performance of their own children in school. Bhumi's engagement with parents from comparable backgrounds in Nepal is thus of interest here.

parent relations to the school in addition to teacher relations with the communities. If students or parents are having particular difficulties, academic or otherwise, these visits provide a more cordial, homely opportunity for private conversations.

I witnessed such a visit for the first time on July 8, 2012. Iswor walked up to the village after lunch, and invited me to join him. We walked around the village, stopping at three tea shops. As we drank tea, villagers asked Iswor about the school, and he in turn asked about the villagers and their children. One shopkeeper, the mother of a tenth grade student who had failed her first term Math exam, asked whether she should allow her daughter to study with her friends. Iswor commented that the student was struggling with her course, so it would make sense for her to study with a friend who could help her. He suggested a couple of girls in the village, but asked that the mother check on them to make sure they were actually studying. When we visited Devendra, he expressed concern that his youngest son, who was in 7th grade “is more naughty even than his elder brothers”. Iswor told Devendra not to worry too much, as his son was very bright, and he assured the father that the teachers would be more vigilant about his son. When we walked past Tulasa’s house, her mother Luna lamented to Iswor that she could not afford to buy a few course books for her.⁷² Iswor pledged to provide Tulasa with the necessary books immediately. Iswor advised and assured the parents in this way, and teachers and parents regularly interacted to address various concerns.

If any of the students do not behave well or are falling behind in school, the teachers send a message to the parents to come to school the next day. The seriousness with which Bhumi teachers take their responsibilities encourages guardians to become invested as well, and the personal relationships that teachers have carefully cultivated compels guardians to show up when requested. Similarly, parents are required to come to the school at least three times a year to receive report cards, as students are not allowed to receive them without supervision. These interactions further establish formal relations between the school and parents and guardians. Such an approach has empowered parents to feel like major stakeholders’ in their children’s education, making them more accountable in the process. Further, their engagement also helps the school monitor and support children, as they do not only open another avenue to ensure regular work completion but also provide a mechanism to

⁷² The school year had started a few months ago, but Tulasa had been too embarrassed to approach her teachers about the books. She borrowed books from others when she could, but would often not complete her homework because she did not have the right books.

determine and monitor parent involvement. Iswor summarized the school's philosophy regarding involving parents thus:

We want parents to participate in school activities to improve the academic performance of students and to keep the parents informed about the school's activities. If parents come to the school, students become more careful as well. Parents can point out our weaknesses and mistakes, and when they see our good performance, they share it with others too. To this day, when the school calls parents, their attendance is extremely high. (Personal Correspondence, 22/10/2014)

The school's success in involving parents in the schooling experience thus strengthens the education experience.

This section has highlighted some of the school's major achievements that justify its branding as a successful public community school. Some of these findings do not only identify but also explain why the school has been successful. A more fundamental question on what exactly this success represents, and what it comes to embody and imply, will be addressed in the next chapter. For now, we turn to explore further why and how this school has been successful in these terms.

III. Positive Deviance

Despite the collective failure of the public school system in recent years in Nepal, Bhumi's success begs the questions of why and how the school has been able to maintain such outcomes. The theory of positive deviance helps draw out some answers to these questions, emphasizing the importance of agency within constrained structures. The focus then is not only on what is wrong and how to fix it, as has often been the focus within development studies, but also what is working in these contexts and why.

This section is divided into two sub-sections. The first section highlights some of the school's prominent positive practices that make it successful while the second section emphasizes Bhumi's 'deviant' practices that nonetheless make the school more successful. I identify here both established pedagogical tools and practices that lead to effective schooling outcomes as well as more innovative systemic manipulations which strengthen these outcomes. Together, the culture of enforcing a set of internal rules that benefits the school while creatively adapting other rules that threaten the school's interests yield desirable student outcomes.

a. A working system

While the task of pinpointing traits that are responsible for the school's success is not straightforward, a systematic study of the dynamics at play provides some powerful hints.

A. *Teacher Initiatives and Democratic Decision-Making*

Teachers are central to school quality because they are the primary agents who interact with students (Graner 2006, Dixit 2002, UNICEF 2000). The onus of delivering positive school outcomes lies with teachers in schools, so it is important to address their role in determining outcomes (Glewwe and Kremer 2006).

Bhumi currently employs 29 teachers, which appears abnormally high for a public school with about 400 students. However, the numbers hide the fact that many of these teachers only work part-time at the school, focusing on particular specialized classes for an hour or two each day. Further, a large proportion of the teachers are either pre-primary or primary school teachers, whereas higher classes face a serious teacher shortage. The number of teachers at Bhumi is thus consistent with the student “pyramid” Graner (2006) noticed in primary schools in Nepal.⁷³ The high enrolment numbers often mask the fact that students are mostly enrolled in 1st grade, requiring more teachers at the primary level. Only three of the teachers at Bhumi are qualified to teach secondary school students, while two others have taken extra classes at their own initiative to be able to teach at that level despite being recognized and paid for only as primary school teachers. This finding is consistent with broader national trends, as education expert Man Prasad Wagle has noted from a field visit to a secondary school:

There were two teachers for primary level and one for lower secondary level. What amused me was, despite having no teachers in the secondary level, students have been taking SLC from the school since years.

If students of Class 9 and 10 are taught all the subjects by teachers of primary and lower secondary level, how can we expect them to do well in SLC? (quoted in Rauniyar 2014).

Despite these shortcomings, the school held, on average, about three staff meetings a month. These were not scheduled in advance but rather announced a couple of days before the meetings, and they usually took place at the end of the school day. Many of the female teachers did not attend these meetings because they had to go home to complete domestic

⁷³ According to Chiranjibi Poudel, Section Officer at Ministry of Education, the total allocations are 120,065 primary school teachers, 25,836 lower-secondary school teachers, and 19,367 secondary school teachers (Rauniyar 2014).

chores while most part-time teachers would not be present towards the end of the school day. However, the Principal would discuss the agenda with them earlier in the day in the staff room to mitigate the gender bias in teacher meetings.

Meeting agendas could be very diverse, from discussing salary disbursement mechanisms to deciding whether to apply to the Ministry of Education to provide vocational training to students. Although it might have been logistically easier for the Principal and the school management to make and effect various decisions unilaterally, they made a conscious effort to discuss decisions democratically to ensure that teachers felt valued and developed a sense of teamwork. The debates also demonstrated the school's commitment to building partnerships with local parents. For instance, during a meeting on July 13, 2012, the teachers had a lively debate to decide the venue to host an award ceremony. Nanda Kishor Foundation, a local organization that provides stationery material to public schools in East Lalitpur each year, hosts an annual award ceremony to recognize the best performing students, teachers, and schools in the area. The event is held at one of the schools in the region each year, and Bhumi had been asked to host the event in 2012. Bhumi's outstanding SLC performance had meant that the school had won the running shield awarded to the best performing school, in addition to numerous individual student awards. For instance, seven of the eight individual teaching awards were being awarded to Bhumi teachers.

Some of the teachers wanted their performance advertised in a different community, so they wanted to request the Foundation to host the event elsewhere. Bishnu, the past Principal and current Patron of the school, said:

We should not have hosted the programme here. If we are going to win the (running) shield, we should go somewhere else to get the shield...instead of doing it in our own place. We could bring the prize home with pride after showing our strength in another place.

However, a few other teachers wanted to host the event at Bhumi. Iswor said, "Nanda Kishor expects schools to take responsibility to organize it each year. This was our turn, so we could not say no." Further, Mukesh added:

We still have parents in this community who do not have complete trust in us. Many students from [Block B area] still go elsewhere. If we show them our success, it can attract them here.

The debate continued for about thirty minutes. Finally, Chaitanya said:

No matter where the programme is held, nobody except those that win actually show up. Even now, no matter where the programme is held, nobody is going to come except us, so it is better to do it here. At least our parents will come and they will be proud.

Iswor added:

We need to tell people around us that we are doing well. Yes, it would be nice to be popular elsewhere, but at the end of the day students would not come to us from those areas. We need people from these villages to recruit their students so there is no point doing it elsewhere.

Although this line of argument settled this discussion, many other contentious issues arose. Further discussions continued about whether Block B or Block A was more suitable to host the event. Although some teachers wanted the meeting to be held in Block A, which Bishnu called “our main school”, the relative easy accessibility to Block B as well as the larger space there decided the venue in Block B’s favour.⁷⁴

Similar discussions were deeply rooted as part of the decision-making process during teacher meetings. Regardless of the issues at stake or the positions being argued, these meetings were intentionally long. All the teachers were given the opportunity to voice their opinion, and while the teachers were often frustrated at how long the meetings dragged on, the forum facilitated engaged discussion that valued each teacher as a contributing member of the school team. These meetings also reflected the strong sense of commitment to the school’s cause, including the desire to build strong networks with those parents and guardians who trusted the school to send their children there.

The teachers were unanimous in their appraisal that the school’s teamwork was paramount in Bhumi’s continued success. According to Arati, the Science teacher, “The teachers are all working in a team, and that is good management. There is a feeling that this school is ours. That feeling is very prevalent.” (19/09/2012) Similarly, Sailesh, the Accounts teacher remarked, “There are some misunderstandings for sure, but the teamwork here is very good. There are no political or other biases or intervention. Often I feel like I am not doing enough, because everyone else is also working so hard for the school.” (12/10/2012)

There was a clear sense of work division among the teachers, with different people taking up different responsibilities to ensure the smooth functioning of the school. Teachers held positions either as members or Coordinators for the following committees: Academic,

⁷⁴ A day before the award ceremony, the local river flooded, damaging the bridge in the process. Neither block was accessible to vehicles as a result, so the event had to be hastily moved to a local private school instead.

Examinations, Extra-Curricular Activities and Junior Red Cross, Physical Infrastructure, Text Book and Library, Science Lab, Accounts, Discipline, and One Laptop per Child Committee. When special tasks came up, teacher meetings assigned smaller teams. For instance, during the SLC students' felicitation programme, teams of four/five teachers were responsible for i) Communication and Invitations ii) Awards iii) State and Sound System iv) Refreshments and v) Cultural Programme. The camaraderie that the teachers enjoyed ensured a positive work environment that further reinforced the school's commitment to its students.

The teachers at Bhumi were also willing to personally contribute to support their students. When students were unable to pay for their uniforms or shoes or meet other costs, the teachers either individually covered the difference or collected from amongst themselves to pay for these shortfalls. When poor parents were unable to buy requirements such as books or stationery or uniform for their children, they knew they could rely on the teachers for help.

Geography played a key role in enabling teachers to financially contribute to the school. The school is only about an hour away from the capital city, which is home to a large number of private colleges (especially 11th and 12th grade). As private colleges have mushroomed in the city, there was a high demand for teachers. Many of the teachers at Bhumi supplemented their school income with early morning (5 am) and late evening (6 pm) classes at these colleges, giving them greater financial stability. Their commitment to the cause of quality education for the poor then allowed them to be more generous with their funds to support Bhumi students. Because such options for supplementary employment did not exist in more rural areas, teachers there were unable to provide such support to their students.

Teacher contributions were not limited to directly paying for necessities. For one, the teachers volunteered to teach extra hours without charging any fees or getting any extra pay. While school hours were from 10 am to 4 pm, Bhumi ran classes from around 8 am for 10th grade students, and 9 am for 8th and 9th grade students to ensure that they got extra attention to prepare for subjects they found difficult. Similarly, 9th and 10th grade students had to stay back for an extra lesson after 4 pm. The teachers were under no obligation to hold these sessions, but they felt that the students would fall behind if they did not put in the extra hours. As Tilak, the academic coordinator, put it;

Our students need a lot of help. They do not have anyone who can help them with their studies at home. If we do not help them, then they might not do well. We [the

teachers] have to do everything we can to make sure they succeed, and if we do not work hard, then their performance might not be good. (10/04/2012)

The longer hours senior students spent at the school also allowed them a few 'free' lessons during the day where they could work on any subject that they found difficult, so that they could seek help from relevant teachers.

The teachers were even willing to take turns to work on Saturdays, their only day off each week. The students preparing for the SLC were worried about their performance, so the school conducted formative exams each Saturday. Bhumi shared the students' worries and anxieties about examination preparation and performance, so a couple of teachers would volunteer to hold mock exams on a different subject each week to give students match practice. Teachers had to thus set extra exams as well as correct them, in addition to the time spent invigilating on holidays.

The work environment that the school promoted did not materialize by accident. The dedication of a few teachers, fuelled first by the Founding Principal, became infectious, as it set the example for the commitment required at the school. An active selection bias was at play, where only the most committed teachers (or applicants) would want to work at Bhumi because of the school's reputation for hard work and dedication. When many of the public schools closed in the region, only those teachers who cared about teaching applied to be reassigned to Bhumi (Tilak, 12/08/2012). Students who had moved from these schools to Bhumi recounted that their previous schools closed because most teachers wasted all their time basking in the sunlight and chatting to each other, but those who came to Bhumi were more likely to be the ones frustrated at, rather than participants in, such delinquent behaviour. Ishwor, who was a principal at a primary school before it closed nine years ago, first moved to another local school but asked to transfer to Bhumi after finding that the other school harboured problematic attitudes to teaching. Those who ended up at Bhumi were thus more likely to conform to the teaching ethos there, and the culture reinforced itself because of the positive selection bias.

One explanation for this remarkable engagement could be the preponderance of local teachers. The relationship between teachers and the village(s) that the school serves is central to teacher effectiveness (Graner 2006: 166). Most teachers at Bhumi do not only live within walking distance from the school, but also grew up there. A number of them studied at Bhumi in their formative years (although they had to go elsewhere after 5th grade, as Bhumi was only

a primary school then) and felt a strong attachment to the school. The school was not only an employer but also a part of their community and they shared a common vision for a better future for that community.⁷⁵

Ananta has been involved with Bhumi since its earliest days. He completed his schooling from a local public school, and began teaching at Bhumi while he was pursuing an Intermediate level degree. He has been teaching at Bhumi for the last 23 years. According to him,

Teaching is a pure profession. You give what you have collected, the knowledge...you give it to them. As students become smarter than us, then we become satisfied...

I grew up here. One thing I like is that me and [another teacher]...we know 100% parents. The two of us know all of them. If they need to call, then they call [another teacher], but to meet they usually come to me, especially because my house is closer. We are not just teachers but we are also guardians. (03/10/2012)

On another occasion, Ananta recounted the experience of his near transfer to another school. As a permanent teacher, he has to accept the government's placement directive.

About six years ago, I was told that I had been transferred to another school in a hilly village. I could not sleep for days. I had lived my whole life here but also given my whole life to this school. I could not leave. I tried to cancel my transfer but the other school did not agree. Although I had been a teacher all my life, and could not see myself doing anything else, I could not leave this school. I went all the way to the other school and presented my letter of resignation. Only then did the Principal [of the other school] realize how much Bhumi meant to me, so he finally approved the cancellation of my transfer. (19/10/2012)

These experiences show the deep attachment some Bhumi teachers felt to the school. Chitra had experienced a similar dilemma only two years ago, when he was offered a permanent place at another public school in Lalitpur. He is a relief teacher at Bhumi so he only has a temporary teaching contract. He could have taken up a tenured position at the other school but he felt so attached to the school and its students that he decided to wait for a tenured position at Bhumi rather than move elsewhere.

Many of the teachers thus felt a strong sense of passion, devotion, and loyalty to Bhumi, and wanted to give their students the best opportunities possible. They dedicated their time, effort, and resources, and were willing to make personal and professional sacrifices to

⁷⁵ On its own, this would be a poor explanation for the school's success because many other weak schools also have local teachers, but they have not achieved similar results. This is true for the public schools in the region that closed in recent years. However, in this instance, the locality of the teachers *combined with* the other factors I discuss in this section, facilitate these improved outcomes for Bhumi students.

achieve those outcomes. In addition to the job satisfaction, these teachers were generally held in high esteem in their villages. They had established themselves as important members of their community through their commitment to the school, and they were widely recognized for their contributions.

The power of this teacher commitment to the school as well as the vote of confidence for the school could be demonstrated by an informal policy that Bhumi had instituted in the last few years. All the teachers at Bhumi have to enrol their children at the same school. Most public school teachers in Nepal send their children to private schools, demonstrating their lack of belief in the public system as well as the schools where they teach. At Bhumi, the stakes for the teachers are no longer limited to their employment but also to their children's aspirations and futures. They have to be good, responsible teachers to ensure that their children get a good education. They are thus not just teachers but also guardians, and if they do not teach well, their own children will also be affected directly. This policy also sends a clear message that they believe in the school, and in their own prowess as educators, to the wider community.

B. Awareness Strategy

The success of the school is palpable in the region not only because of its results but also the perception of success that the school has been able to disseminate. The visibility of the school's success leaves a lasting impression among parents and guardians, along with current as well as prospective students, reinforcing the potential for further achievement.

The school has consciously sought to make its presence felt, and has capitalized on its successes to advertise itself effectively. Prativa's SLC performance was remarkable for leaving a mark at the national stage, and Bhumi aggressively pushed to ensure that she got her due recognition. As Figure 8 shows (p. 177), the school produced big advertising posters to announce her results, and then tied the school's interest in enrolling more students to this success. The big banners throughout the region still serve as reminders of the national prominence that Bhumi gained through Prativa. Further, the teachers at Bhumi also lobbied businessmen, local politicians, district and national education departments, as well as public and private school organizations to ensure that Prativa was felicitated in multiple forums. The exposure that Bhumi were able to get for Prativa ensured not only publicity but a substantial

cash purse (close to Rs 100,000)⁷⁶ for her. The school also negotiated on Prativa's behalf to get her a full scholarship for her higher education at a private college in Kathmandu.

The school's awareness strategy has already been discussed in other contexts as well. The parades during Junior Red Cross and Red Crescent day as well as after the SLC elections were designed to pique community interest in the school. Their visibility coupled with their success has attracted positive attention for them from media outlets, education specialists, politicians, and philanthropists. This year, they were felicitated by the Ministry of Education (12/07/2012), Nanda Kishor Foundation (20/07/2012), and various national student unions (31/08/2012). The school's staff room is adorned with certificates and letters of appreciation the school has received in the last few years.

Figure 10 Some school awards



This sense of success has given greater meaning to their academic pursuits, increasing parent engagement as well as student interest in pursuing these goals. The message that being successful will lead to widespread recognition and emulation has been received loud and clear, and teachers regularly point to these achievements in trying to motivate students to push themselves to achieve more.

⁷⁶ 1 GBP = ~130 NPR (XE Currency 2013)

C. Private School Practices

The irony of Bhumi's acclaimed success as a public community school is that it has consciously replicated and institutionalized some practices closely associated with private schools to achieve these successes. In consultation with the other teachers, Mukesh, the school Principal, has incorporated various private school practices appropriate for Bhumi's growth and success. By acting differently than what is expected from a public school, Bhumi has now established a strong reputation in the region.

i. English language instruction

The main distinction between private and government schools is language of instruction, as English is favoured as the best means of obtaining a good job. Dadagaun villagers, including parents of Bhumi school students, highlight that local private schools offer an advantage over Bhumi because they use English as the medium of instruction. Anita Magar said that she did not send her children to Bhumi, choosing instead to send them to a local private school because "the teaching was not in English" (12/11/2012). Even those who sent their children to Bhumi were concerned about their English proficiency. Kripa Shrestha said, "My granddaughter attended Bhumi and got a distinction. I am very happy about that, but I am worried that her English might not be good enough because she did not go to a private school" (01/11/2012). Anil Thapa Magar thought that Bhumi is better than private schools but he expected English to be weaker there than in private schools (16/10/2012). One of the main reasons Abhishek wanted his youngest son to remain at the private school, despite his son's desire to attend Bhumi, was the perceived better English opportunities there. English is seen as the language of upward mobility in Nepal, and private schools are able to attract a lot of students by providing primary and secondary school classes entirely in English (Caddell 2006).

When parents, guardians and students were asked how Bhumi fared in comparison to private schools in the region, their primary concern was about the public school's Nepali medium of instruction. While most parents were oblivious to the nature or quality of English being used in local private schools, particularly because they were themselves not versed in the language, they were nonetheless convinced that students who attended these schools would get a clear advantage.

Bhumi has responded to this perception by changing the medium of instruction to English for primary school students. The school has progressively introduced English as the language of instruction for 1st and 2nd graders a few years ago to up to 6th grade students this year. Some of the classes for 7th and 8th grade students are also conducted in English, even though 9th and 10th grade students are still taught in Nepali. The idea is to continue to widen the scope to introduce English language teaching for the whole school within the next few years.

This effort to become an English-medium school faces significant challenges. Most notably, the public school teachers are not well-equipped to teach in English, as their command over the language is minimal at best. As Chameli, a primary school teacher, put it,

The school is good. As a non-English teacher, it is hard. Now English is an international language. I am learning English myself to teach others too. We are all trying hard from our end, but still a lot of good things would be possible if we could focus on English. Now, everyone is asking for it. If we go anywhere, even when I go to my maternal home, not knowing English makes me embarrassed. I grew up in such a place where we did not know English, but now this emphasis is everywhere. (02/10/2012)

People's aspirations through schooling are thus evolving to also include a desire to master the English language, and even teachers are feeling that pressure. However, even English, one of the core courses for all students in the school curriculum, is predominantly taught in Nepali, so it is difficult to expect that all subjects can be effectively taught in English in the near future. The students face a tough task adjusting to the new system as well, as demonstrated by the fact that 14 of 24 grade 8 students failed their terminal Pre-vocational exam, after the curriculum was changed to English this year. Pre-vocational had never been a subject to yield so many failures, and when students were asked the same questions informally in Nepali, it was clear that they failed because of the language barrier rather than lack of knowledge. There is thus a clear initial cost to changing the system to English medium, even if it is to remain competitive as a quality education provider in the region.

Early difficulties in transition are to be expected, but parent perceptions are already changing in Dadagaun. Anita said she would gladly send her children to Bhumi now. Abhishek finally allowed his son to attend Bhumi not only because of their SLC performance but also because they were changing to English as the medium of instruction. Bhumi's incremental approach to begin with primary students to then build up to lower secondary

level has made the transition easier, and the model will be extrapolated further to one day adopt English as the official medium of instruction. The teachers are also getting some practice with the younger students with the hope that they can adapt to teaching secondary school students in the future. Most importantly, parents and students increasingly see Bhumi as being at par with local private schools, not only because of SLC results but also because of the language of instruction. The level and quality of English being used in most local private schools are very low as well, so Bhumi's slow shift to English is probably not providing anything significantly different in those terms. However, the school is now seen to have responded to people's perceptions of education quality and the general rise of private schools by slowly adopting English as the medium of instruction. That the students are being introduced to the language at an early age could make a significant difference to students' receptiveness and learning outcomes in English in the long term.

ii. Daily Diary

Bhumi has sought to formalize the relationship between students, teachers, and parents by piloting a system of daily diaries in 2012. Each student has been provided with a diary, in which they are required to note down their homework and assignments for the day. The student is supposed to finish all their work and get a guardian to sign the diary the next morning. The guardian has to thus check whether their ward has completed their work before returning to school. In turn, the class teacher has to sign the diary at the end of each day, checking for both the children and their guardians' involvement in the process. Whether or not the teacher has signed each day also informs the guardians about teacher availability and engagement in the classroom, thereby ensuring reciprocal accountability. In practice, numerous challenges have emerged. For instance, many guardians and some teachers simply sign the diary for months at a time, thereby undermining the expected regular engagement. However, the school's proactive measures to engage students and parents create a cultural expectation of involvement, which the children themselves enforce by demanding that both guardians and parents sign these diaries regularly. The school administration was also very serious about this practice, as they regularly discussed non-compliance, including by teachers, at meetings to ensure everyone followed the correct procedure.

The practice of using diaries on a regular basis has only been observed in elite private schools in the country. None of the schools in the region, public or private, have been known to use such diaries. Bhumi's use of these diaries establishes a new form of contract among various stakeholders. The school administration, the teachers, the student, and the guardians

are all bound to the student's education mission through the diary, and accountability is devolved, at least in theory, to an everyday exercise. Whereas private schools establish a contract based on their business model sustained by school fees, Bhumi continues to provide free education while still ensuring a sense of shared responsibility towards schooling. This system not only ensures that parents and guardians are more involved with their children's education but also holds public school teachers accountable, especially in the context where numerous public schools throughout the country suffer from chronic teacher absenteeism. There is certainly room for improvement, as students, teachers, and guardians alike falter in their use of the diary system, but the seeds have been planted to move in the right direction.

iii. School Assembly

The school officially starts at 10 a.m. but all students must reach the premises by 9.45 a.m. for the school assembly. The students form lines in front of the school. First, the students perform basic physical training exercises for a few minutes. Next, they sing the national anthem along with the teachers, with their hands on their hearts. They then join their hands together and sing a prayer to Saraswati, the goddess of learning. A student conducts the assembly as its Master of Ceremony (MC), and s/he invites at least two people to come to the front and present their talent to the school. The two individual performers get a day to prepare, and the most common performances include singing songs, reciting poems, asking general knowledge questions, and showcasing original art work. After the performances, the MC picks their successor MC as well as two performers for the next day. Next, the Principal or other teachers make necessary announcements before dismissing the assembly to start school.

The assemblies provide a sense of discipline and regularity to the school routine. The acknowledgment of membership to the school becomes more pronounced during these collective gatherings. Further, students also get to showcase their talent and host events each day. The exercise is completely student-driven, as they give continuity to who hosts each day as well as what each student chooses to perform.

iv. Uniform and hygiene

Numerous Bhumi students reported that private schools were very strict with their rules and made all students wear the right clothes and forced them to be clean. Bhumi students are now required to wear school uniform, and assemblies provide the perfect venue to enforce these rules. Students have to wear one of two sets of uniform, based on particular

days: light blue shirts and dark blue trousers or faded white shirts and grey trousers, along with a belt and a tie, as well as black shoes. Girls are also expected to wear blue ribbons to tie up their hair.

The students were enthusiastic about their uniform, as they felt it helped maintain coherence among the group and improved hygiene. Many of the students reported that the school should be stricter in enforcing uniform rules, as they wanted all the students to look the same. According to Bikram, a 10th grade student, “We have to wear the right clothes and uniform, and be strict in that. Even I have worn slippers now and then, but no one is saying anything.” (04/10/2012). I was initially surprised by student demands for better hygiene and discipline regulation, but this desire could be explained by their interest in appearing competitive with private school students in the region. During a focus group on October 14, 2012, students expressed the belief that private schools’ sense of discipline helped the students with their studies. Until recently, Bhumi students had felt inferior to their private school counterparts because they did not wear school uniform and did not have a sense of school pride. However, school assemblies and smart uniforms gave them a sense of school identity, which they cherished.

Some of the students who transferred from private to public schools emphasized the importance of keeping up appearances. Students are keen to ‘dress up’ to appear smart, and uniforms make them feel important to the point that they want their teachers to enforce those rules more strictly (Anuja, 12/10/2012). There is a clear expectation from uniform, then, as students want to feel that their uniform is comparable to private school uniform, and that they belong to a larger whole.

Figure 11 School assembly



(Bhumi students perform ‘physical exercise’ in their uniform during a school assembly.)

These clothes also send a positive message to the parents and the community. Although there is a small cost associated with buying uniforms (Rs 300-500 a year), most guardians appreciate the sense of formality that comes with the official clothes. It helps that the teachers support poor students, often from their own pockets, to ensure that everyone has the right uniform. After school assemblies, students without the right uniform would be held back. If these students were not wearing the right clothes because they could not afford them, teachers would either find sponsors or pay for them themselves, but if students were being negligent or lazy, they would be punished.

v. Relationship with organizations and private donors

Bhumi has made a conscious effort to establish relations with various organizations and private donors to ensure that they could get support to further the interests of the school. The school delegated the role of Coordinator for Public Relations to an active part-time teacher, and this teacher was responsible for maintaining relationships with various stakeholders to further the school’s causes.

SEIN is one such organization with whom the school has built a meaningful partnership. Bhumi has been able to construct a building for a library and a Science lab partly

with funds provided by SEIN, and the organization has also organized various training workshops to support teaching practices at the school. Further, SEIN provides funds to the school to defray the salary for a part-time teacher, and they have placed some international volunteer teachers for short teaching positions in the past.

Similarly, the school also receives various forms of support from other organizations such as Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) Nepal, who have provided various trainings to Bhumi teachers to counsel students who face difficulties at school and at home. I have already mentioned some of the support Bhumi receives from the One Laptop per Child (OLPC) Programme and the Nanda Kishor Foundation. In addition, Bhumi has also relied on support from local and national philanthropists to provide various resources required by the school.

The school's proximity to the capital city helps initiate and maintain these relationships. The coordinator for Physical Infrastructure and the Principal often reschedule their classes or request other teachers to cover for them so they can gather support from private individuals as well as organizations. They also regularly lobby the Village Development Committee, District Education Office, and the Ministry of Education, among others, to increase their budget and support for the school. The 'semi-peripheral' nature of the school thus allows the administration to remain involved with the school in the village while also being close enough to initiate and negotiate new relationships with the centres of authority and opportunity in the capital city, improving the school's potential for greater success.

vi. SLC preparation

Private schools have been particularly successful in securing high marks in the SLC, which grants them the aura of providing quality education. A significant part of Bhumi's success, and thus their ability to compete with local private schools in the region, can be attributed to their ability to adapt to the examination system through preparation practices pioneered by private schools in recent years.

The pressure to succeed through the schooling system is extremely high, and the SLC marks an important step in moving ahead. In order to do well in the SLC, private schools have taken to intense coaching classes in the last few months preceding the exam. Even day-scholar students are encouraged to become temporary boarders at the school itself, with teachers focusing exclusively on exam preparation. Students are forced to follow a strict,

regimented timeline, with particular emphasis on rote-learning all mock papers and past papers to ensure success in the SLC. Caught in a system where assessment—and many other opportunities of higher education and employment—rely primarily on these techniques, Bhumi has recognized that the only way to succeed is to engage with that system.

The needs of the students at Bhumi are even more acute because of their socio-economic background. Most students face significant challenges at home to make ends meet, and do not get the peaceful, conducive environment necessary to focus only on their studies. As discussed in the previous chapter, even young children are expected to wake up before dawn to collect water, gather and sell firewood, tend livestock, cook meals, and work in the farms. Many students are unable to afford two meals a day, let alone get a balanced diet, so they face serious challenges in concentrating on their work. Bhumi tries to mitigate these problems for students, for instance by teaching extra classes in the evenings, but given the sensitive time period for those appearing for the SLC, the school made special arrangements for 10th graders.

For two months before the SLC that year, Bhumi ran an exam camp at its premises. Given the financial as well as logistical constraints (no boarding facilities), the school could not provide room and board for the SLC examinees, but it made the next-best arrangement: a full-day programme. Students were expected to get to the school by 6 a.m., and left only after 8 p.m. All their meals were provided for at the school itself, and most of the disturbances that they would have faced in their villages were minimized. Given the importance placed on these exams, parents and guardians were happy to allow their children to focus completely on their SLC exams at this time. The teachers also set them a detailed plan for revising their coursework based on their individual needs, and were available throughout the day to both support and supervise their preparation.

The significant effort that teachers put into the camp went above and beyond their job description. In addition to the teachers teaching extra hours during school days and conducting formative tests during weekends for no extra pay or compensation, they also helped fund the SLC camp. The cost of running the two-month camp came to about Rs 53,000, most of which was spent on providing a nutritious diet to the students. To recuperate this cost from the twenty students appearing for the SLC, the school had asked each student to contribute Rs 2,500. However, the school was realistic that most families could not afford to pay that price, so the amount was more of a suggestion than an expectation. The school

ended up collecting Rs 19,000 in total from the students, which left a shortfall of Rs 34,000. A teacher responsible for running the camp then voluntarily paid the remaining amount himself.

In covering these high costs, the actions of Ishwor, the Examination Coordinator, demonstrate the extent to which some of the teachers cared about their students and their performance. When faced with the shortfall for the SLC camp, Ishwor was clear about what needed to be done.

The children ate the food so that they would be ready for the exams. In private schools, they eat meat and energy drinks and they have heaters to stay warm, and many other facilities. Here, at least we could give them some eggs and even if they were holed in their classroom they had company while they studied. Now they have already eaten the eggs, so what do I say? Do I force them to give the egg back? They ate, and we wanted them to eat...so I just paid the difference. What else to do? (10/07/2012)

This is no mean feat. Ishwor donated the equivalent of about three months' salary to ensure that students had the right preparation for the SLC. The contribution is all the more remarkable because it is beyond his immediate means. In an earlier conversation, he had confirmed that he was struggling to pay for his children's higher education, and had sold some of his land as well as borrowed some more money to pay his elder son's engineering college fees. Yet, he found the resources to ensure that the SLC camp was paid for without having to trouble the students themselves. His actions reflect the ethos with which the teachers at Bhumi treat the students: as their own children, not merely as formal students.⁷⁷ Perhaps it is not such a surprise then that students have achieved excellent SLC results.

There is an element of doctoring the circumstances to ensure SLC success in Bhumi, and this serves as a good way to transition to the next section. The teachers hold regular tests and exams throughout 10th grade to monitor student results. If it appears that some students are unlikely to pass the SLC, they are asked to repeat 10th grade. The possibility of failure is thus pre-empted before it becomes a problem, which is a common practice in private schools. Last year, two out of the 22 students decided to repeat 10th grade, meaning only twenty of them took the SLC and the school achieved 100% success. The decision was beneficial to the students, as the extra year gave them more time to prepare and succeed: six students have

⁷⁷ There is a self-sacrificing element to these actions, for he could have accepted some support from the other teachers, who would have been willing to defray the costs, even if doing so would be difficult for them too. However, the value of this contribution cannot be diminished, because he also felt responsible to ensure that the camp ran smoothly as its coordinator.

repeated their 10th grade since Bhumi became a secondary school, and they have all passed in subsequent years. While the decision to repeat a grade is not easy, it also ensures that the school's interests are protected and the student succeeds in the exams rather than being deemed a failure, which has serious consequences.

The adoption of these practices (closely associated with private schools) allowed Bhumi the opportunity to demonstrate themselves as a viable schooling alternative in the community. The emulation of these practices was not entirely by chance. The founder who served as the Principal for almost three decades had to give up his position because he did not have the academic qualification to be Principal when the school was upgraded to a secondary school. There were numerous internal candidates who could have made a legitimate claim to the top position. Some teachers with the right qualification, such as Ananta and Tilak, had been involved with the school since its inception, and their application would have been approved without any problems. However, these teachers came to the conclusion that they did not have the experience or know-how to lead the school in the current climate where public schools faced serious challenges (Tilak, July 6, 2012).

The teachers thus decided to approach Mukesh, who had been serving as a Principal of a private school in a nearby town for the last seven years. The school had been well-managed, and Mukesh had a reputation of being a committed, hard-working leader. Mukesh had been having doubts about his role at the private school because the primary expectation placed on him was to ensure profit for the proprietors, not focus on student needs and outcomes. The opportunity to lead a school with a clear interest in public service was attractive to him, and he moved to live near Bhumi. After spending a year at Bhumi as an English teacher and an understudy, he took over to become the Principal in 2010, with the founder being recognized as the Patron of the school for his contributions. This move appears to have been successful, based on the school's results in recent years.

These are thus some of the platforms that have helped Bhumi establish a reputation as a quality education provider in the region. The perceptions of parents and teachers as well as the notions of success also demonstrate how education quality is understood and experienced in the area. The next section will explore some other Bhumi practices that are further away from normalcy, but this deviance is crucial to its success.

b. Manipulating a system

The discussions of public schools focus primarily on shortcomings: lack of accountability, transparency, resources, and will (Caddell 2006, Bhatta 2005). These outcomes are not a given, however, and Bhumi's negotiation of these challenges provides important answers in addressing severe difficulties within a dysfunctional system. In addition to the more acceptable positive practices that the school has pursued, and perhaps because of them, Bhumi has also effectively manipulated rules and regulations to create a working space where they are able to achieve their goals despite the constraints.⁷⁸ The public school system itself is broadly considered to be failing, so there is recognition and an implicit agreement that there is a need to manipulate parts of that system to lead to productive outcomes.

i. Creative Fund Use

One of the biggest problems with the public school system has been the widespread abuse of state resources. The government disburses funds under different headings but the lack of transparency and accountability has meant that a large share of these funds do not get used appropriately. The concern with school resources is not only limited to its availability but also its distribution and its effective use (Lee and Zuze 2011: 391). The state had not been able to hold teacher's examinations to regulate their permanent contracts, pay scales, or hiring practices for 18 years (Paudyal 2012). It should thus come as no surprise that the government has been unable to ensure appropriate use of funds in the public school system.

The teachers at Bhumi, however, have been able to use precisely this state of disarray to manipulate available funds for better education access for all. The District Education Office and the Village Development Committee disburse funds to incentivize formal schooling for girls as well as Dalit students. Parents of these students are entitled to regular stipends to defray education costs as long as they ensure enrolment and regular school attendance. These initiatives are in line with the government's desire to achieve international MDG and EFA targets. Girls and Dalits are identified as especially vulnerable groups that require incentives, so these monetary contributions are expected to support their education pursuits.

⁷⁸ Harper and Tarnowski (2008) have argued that resistance to the state and the bureaucracy is absolutely critical to achieving targets in community forestry and public health at the local level in the Nepali context. Policies and directives devised in the Centre often fail to take local realities into account, so adaptability is a crucial part of local implementation.

The policies in place allow for some students to be eligible to receive two different funds. Dalit girl students could technically be beneficiaries to both Dalit subsidies as well as female subsidies. However, the school recognizes that a number of poor students who are not either Dalit or girls (i.e. non-Dalit boys) also face the exact same economic problems that make it difficult for them to make ends meet. The teachers thus redistribute the funds available to them so that instead of some students (Dalit girls) getting two stipends, the extra funds are provided to deserving non-Dalit boys who are unable to pay for basic nominal expenses such as afternoon snacks. These decisions are not made on an ad-hoc basis but through informal discussions between teachers, to ensure that all students get equal opportunities to continue their education. When Dhiraj, the 9th grade student who works at a brick factory to support his family, could not afford to buy text books or uniform, for instance, the teachers decided to help him to ensure that he stayed in school.

There is an obvious danger that misdirecting funds could have unintended, negative consequences. One difficulty could arise because of the apparent monetary loss for Dalit girls, as they are getting less than what they are entitled to. However, because the school still charges no admission or tuition fees, the direct costs of schooling are low. The school provides stationery items for primary students as well, and provides subsidies for uniform costs where necessary, so the sense of injustice is not pronounced.

In fact, some of the Dalit parents were keen to make more of a contribution to the school. Two mothers of Dalit students visited the school to inquire about their children's education in May. One of the teachers present in the teacher's room asked if they had received the stipend through their children, to which the mothers inquired if they could contribute towards the school.⁷⁹ The mothers suggested that since the school is providing almost all services for free, it should keep the stipend as well and use it for the betterment of the school. The teachers responded that they did not need that money then, even though the school might need support from parents in the near future to build libraries. As the parents continued to insist that they use the scholarship money for the school, the teachers explained that it would not look good to keep the money, as either other villagers or the district/national bureaucracy might take offence at such liberties. It was the teachers then who were convincing the Dalit parents that they would rather the parents took the money. When the

⁷⁹ The teacher's room also functions as the Principal's Office, the guest room, the Science lab, the meeting room and the computer room.

teachers redistributed the money, then, there was little doubt that they were doing so to facilitate education for everyone, not abusing the funds.

The school did not have any qualms about redirecting funds received from philanthropists and private donors either, as long as they were used to advance the collective interests of the school. Many of the contributors often came with specific ideas about where they wanted to intervene, and the teachers would gladly agree to their conditions, only to apply their own oversight once they had access to the resources. Funds earmarked for school uniforms for primary school students could then be used to buy essential science lab equipment for secondary school as long as the primary students were well-clothed. The school made no pretensions about the level of flexibility they were willing to assume for its success, and were open to other stakeholders such as the parents and community members about these actions.

The manipulation of funds on its own might have looked suspicious if not for the teachers' many other financial contributions. However, given the extent to which teachers put in their money for the sake of their students, when the school decided to manipulate the use of funds for various reasons, the communities accepted such intervention as necessary and justified.⁸⁰

ii. Flexible Hiring Strategy

The school is adaptive in its hiring practices to ensure that they serve the students better, and has made innovative adjustments to counter the problems of resource scarcity in the school system.

Bhumi gets allotted a salary to hire a caretaker for the school. The current caretaker also happens to be the mother of a part-time teacher. She is illiterate and does not necessarily meet the credential requirements for the position. However, she was hired because she lives within a minute's walk from the school, so can be there at a moment's notice. Because she lives nearby, they do not have to hire a night guard either, as she can lock up the school as well as be aware of anything untoward that might happen at night. Further, because of her connection to the school as well as the recognition of her lack of credentials, she accepts the

⁸⁰ The system is not perfect, however, as demonstrated by a student from a poor family in Dadagaun who has been given three new backpacks in the last year. The fifth grader works hard and is doing well in school, so seems to have been repeatedly selected when individual donors seek high-performing poor students to support. As such, the effort has been to recognize different students with need and distribute available resources accordingly.

payment of only about Rs 3,700 a month, even though the mandated salary is about Rs 6,500 a month. The school then uses the savings towards funding a special subject teacher to better prepare secondary school students appearing for the SLC. The school tries to supplement the helper's salary whenever possible—they gave her the Rs 500 they got for selling old paper in the teachers' room, for instance—but the hiring and payment relationship are clear to all parties.

This news about paying the guard less than their allotted share somehow reached the guard/helpers' Association, and a representative called the Principal (03/10/2012). The Principal was neither dishonest nor apologetic, confirming instead the exact details of the arrangement. He acknowledged that the rules stated that the helper should be paid more, but if the Association were to force the school to follow these rules, Bhumi would have to make some changes too. First, since the school was in a relatively isolated area, the school would have to hire another helper to cover the night shift, which would mean that the salary available to the helper and/or guard would have to be divided between two people to about Rs 3,300 each. Second, if the school were expected to follow all the rules, they would be forced to advertise the positions openly, and would hire the most qualified candidate, which would almost certainly mean that the current helper would lose her job. If the Association insisted that the school follow the right procedures, the Principal reported, he would not put the school's reputation at risk, and would go ahead with meeting these requirements. However, the Principal urged the representative to visit the community, understand why they were taking that particular course of action, and decide for themselves if Bhumi was abusing its authority. The Association has not visited the school or sought further action since.

Once again, the teachers at Bhumi themselves set the precedent for leading such initiatives. In August, the school found out that the Ministry of Education was planning to hire an accountant for all public schools. Each school would receive about Rs 10,000 as the base salary for the accountant. The school immediately filed papers to claim this salary, including asking for retrospective pay for having employed someone in that position for the last six months. In reality, the Accounts teacher had already been acting as the school accountant for the past few years, and had also filed the school's taxes as well as audit reports. This policy merely allowed the school the opportunity to cash in on the new programme. The teacher himself proposed that they seek those funds immediately, but not to supplement (i.e. almost double) his income but to ensure that the funds could then be used to increase the salary for some of the extra teachers, who were being paid almost half the

regular salary because of resource constraints. The school would thus create a bogus position, continue to accept a teacher's offer to volunteer to complete the job, and use the funds to pay for other teachers required at the school.

This dynamic was not new to the school either. As mentioned before, when some of the surrounding schools closed, some of the teachers with effective tenure from the state were reallocated to nearby schools, and Bhumi was assigned a couple of teachers as a result. The state would continue to provide the salary for these teachers, but they had to accept a position at another public school. Not all the teachers want to take up these positions, however, especially if they have other sources of income.

One of these teachers owned a profitable business in a nearby village, and so there were doubts as to whether he would remain a teacher. The failure of the state to hold teacher exams for eighteen years has led to a serious dearth of tenured teachers throughout the country. As a result, these tenured positions from schools that are closing down are extremely sought after by public schools.⁸¹ Bhumi negotiated an agreement with the teacher in question so that the school would sustain a ruse that he was a regular teacher at Bhumi as long as he contributed a part of his salary to support Bhumi.

The tenured teacher thus did not attend Bhumi on a daily basis, instead focusing on his business. He was not entirely disengaged either, as he would often be asked to fulfil external responsibilities that involved travel to the city, such as picking up stationery material in bulk, renting equipment for special events, and accompanying students to hospitals for health checkups. However, the school doctors some of his attendance records to ensure that he fulfils all of his employment requirements. The teachers share the teaching responsibilities to then cover for him, and use the extra funds to hire more tutors for 10th grade students.

Bhumi teachers were therefore clearly involved in redirecting school funds and manipulating hiring practices at the school, but they did so to support better student outcomes, as evidenced by their own financial contributions and extra time commitments to the school.

⁸¹ Incidentally, the failure of the state to hold these exams has allowed Bhumi to hire teachers locally. Tenured teachers are contractually obligated to teach at any location of the state's choosing, so they are not necessarily locals in public schools. Without the required supply of tenured teachers, Bhumi has greater liberty to hire local teachers, even though they have to raise some funds to supplement these positions. Although there are other disadvantages to the state failing to conduct these exams, this disarray has allowed Bhumi the flexibility to strengthen its commitment to education in the region.

iii. SMC Election Engineering

The election for the School Management Committee (SMC) provided another opportunity to see the school's deviance to strengthen school outcomes in action. As I noted in chapter three, although SMCs were envisioned as a means to democratize schooling and allow for greater local control, in reality many of these committees have served as breeding ground for party politics to control school resources.

The SMC election at one of Bhumi's neighbouring schools in November 2012 provided a clear example of how party politics can come to dominate public school affairs. During the time of the election, there was very little discussion on the role of the SMC in supporting the school. Instead, the election provided another avenue for the student wings of various political parties to compete with each other. The candidates for various leadership positions presented themselves as aligned either with CPN-Maoist, Nepali Congress, or Communist Party of Nepal- United Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and the mood in the school resembled that of a general election. The conversations about the SMC were entirely dominated by party politics, instead of school and student interests.

Given the potential pitfalls surrounding the politicization of SMC's, Bhumi has been intent on keeping such politics at bay, to the extent that they engineer the process. The first reference to the SMC election took place at a teacher's meeting on May 17, 2012. The SMC election is held every three years, and the school had the responsibility to ensure smooth transition from one committee to the next. The teachers mentioned that it would be beneficial to elect a Chair who is both helpful and available, rather than a disturbance or a hindrance, as had been the case in other schools in the region.

Ashutosh Thapa, the outgoing Chair, lives in the village where the school is located, placing him only a minute away from the school. He does not have an extensive academic background but is an active member of the community, and is mostly proficient in dealing with water pipelines and building/engineering projects. Although he shared a close relationship with school teachers, there were numerous instances where the Chair and the teachers disagreed. For instance, when the school was considering raising Rs 100 from each student's family to build a school library, he raised strong reservations, and the proposal was ultimately shelved. Similarly, when villagers raised concerns that Ashutosh was diverting some of the free water supply meant for the school to his own backyard, the teachers had to warn him that he could not divert the school's water, even when the school is not in session.

Nonetheless, the teachers and the Chair were in good terms, and Ashutosh could be found in or around the school premises, engaging with issues related to the school, on a daily basis.

Given the current climate of uncertainty related to the country's failure to endorse a new constitution, the teachers expressed concern at the meeting that the school's agenda could be politicized. The school's recent triumphs had placed it strongly in the regional as well as national spotlight, so the danger was further accentuated. The teachers wanted to ensure geographical, ethnic, and gender representation within the committee, but were keen for the SMC Chair to live close by, be available to support the school, and travel to different places on official work when necessary. The teachers were open to the idea of electing new people to the committee, but were constantly worried that some elements of the community who would try to overtly politicize the system for their personal gain might usurp the committee. They felt the problems were accentuated by the fact that the parents there were not fully aware of these forces and the resulting implications, so the teachers felt they had to intervene. Their stakes in these issues were also higher because, as mentioned earlier, most of their children were enrolled at Bhumi, so the teachers were also concerned parents.

Discussions about preparing the right candidate were conducted carefully to ensure that the teachers did not break any elections rules directly. A teacher suggested that they prepare and propose a candidate to find out what parents think about the candidate. After a heated discussion, a clear consensus emerged that such a course of action would be dangerous, as parents are ultimately responsible for electing the person, and the community might object that they are being forced to agree to an agenda usurped by the teachers. The teachers referred continually to the rule book, going over the logistics of the SMC election in detail, during the discussion to ensure that they would not directly infringe any rules or regulations.

Ananta, the social studies teacher, who has been associated with the school for over twenty-five years, provided some historical insight into the matter. Three years ago, when the election was about to take place, Bishnu, the Principal at the time, had requested Ananta to ease the ground for the current Chair's election. When the meeting began, then, Ananta talked about the specifics of the job and told the audience that the school wanted someone like Ashutosh, "who is always available, who fixes the roofs and tins and water pumps when needed, and attends meetings and events in town even at short notice". He then asked parents who would be willing to make such contributions to come forward. As expected, the parents

countered by suggesting that if this person is who the school needs, why not elect him as the chair? Ashutosh was duly elected, unopposed, as a result.

Based on this discussion, the teachers came to the agreement that it would not be right to nominate someone directly from the school, but they could find innovative ways to do what is best for the school. The teachers came up with a plan to influence potentially rowdy or disgruntled parents as well. The election of the SMC was to take place concurrently with the election of the Parents-Teachers Association (PTA). Those interested parents who could not be accommodated in the SMC could thus be nominated and elected for the PTA so that they feel they have won too, helping them save face by serving in a body with fewer responsibilities and influence in the functioning of the school.

The teachers' meeting on May 31, 2012 finalized the date for the SMC election.⁸² The teachers decided to hold the meeting after the result distribution for a class test, to ensure higher attendance from parents. On the day of the meeting, an extensive list with the names of all students and their parents was published on the school notice board. Some of the teachers eulogized the school's recent achievements, and thanked the outgoing committee for their hard work and support. Chaitanya, a lower secondary teacher, remarked that parents and teachers were the two pillars that make it possible for the school to stand strong. Ashutosh was introduced and thanked enthusiastically for his support in his last term, and he got to address the floor as well.

Before the election began, three teachers spoke in turn about the future of the school as well as the dangers of politicizing the school system. Phrases such as "We should not let politics enter our school" or "We have managed to live together for so long; let's not allow politicians to divide us", and "Our children should matter more than our politics" were repeated throughout the day. It soon became apparent that the target of these slogans was a chair of a Maoist Teacher's Association (MTA) in the region.⁸³ His wife is a part-time teacher in Block B and their daughter is a student at the school, so he was well within his rights to contest the election, but he remained silent throughout the meeting.

⁸² The procedure to conduct the election is to publish the name list of all the parents of the school, denoting their availability for nomination. Three days after the publication of this list, the school sends letters to all the parents, inviting them to attend the meeting. The parents have to be given a notice of about a week before the meeting can be scheduled.

⁸³ After teachers made various statements about preventing the politicization of the SMC, they would immediately turn to look at the MTA Chair and let their words sink in. I later confirmed with the teachers that they were indeed worried about the MTA Chair contesting the elections.

The election for the SMC went to script for the school, with all the interested outgoing members, including a part-time teacher who is also a parent, getting re-elected. After the election, the MTA Chair was invited to speak, and he took offense to the numerous jibes at him. Although he had been felicitated as a special guest at the start of the ceremony, he felt disheartened that his presence had been taken as an attempt to interfere politically, rather than simply as a parent performing his duties as expected by the school. He also highlighted that he was not the first political person to be involved with the school, so he should not be singled out in trying to keep politics out of the school system.

He had a point. Chaitanya had been a teacher for seven years at the school that is now Bhumi's Block B, before deciding to quit his job to contest and win a local level election. Representing the CPN-UML party, he had been elected the Chair of the Village Development Committee, and he served for five years. He was instrumental in facilitating the merger of the now-defunct school to Bhumi, and has been teaching again for the past nine years. His political past is seen as strength rather than hindrance, even though many teachers at Bhumi do not share his political allegiance. He is the coordinator for the physical infrastructure committee and leads the fundraising efforts for the school. His acceptance in the teaching fold also results from his being a local as well as his willingness to use his networks to raise funds and prioritize the school consistently. The fear of politics entering the school is thus concerned with the specific danger of partisan politics, even as some teachers have a political past.

In any case, the school was conscious of the positive outcomes that it sought, and demonstrated 'deviant' behaviour to ensure that politically non-partisan and consistently supportive parents were elected to the SMC. While they took great pains to ensure they did not break any official rules, they were willing to bend them to ensure that the school achieved its outcomes.

IV. Implications

These findings provide openings for further analysis, including serious implications for the future. While positive deviance relies on identifying successful behaviour within struggling systems to be able to replicate and possibly scale them further, the unique circumstances at Bhumi, if replicated out of context, could lead to more problems than solutions. The level of discretion exercised by the teachers, for instance, could lead to a fractured, teacher-captured structure that consolidates power, money, and resources in their

own hands. Reassigning the use of allocated funds could well lead to its misuse, or even embezzlement. Flexible hiring practices could lead to a more entrenched, corrupt, unaccountable, and patronage-based system. The capacity for failure and the potential to do harm cannot be underestimated.

It must be noted, however, that most of these potential dangers are already the hallmarks of the public school system at large, which is crippled by lack of accountability, corruption, nepotism, hiring manipulations, and political interference. Bhumi's deviance, meanwhile, has been coupled with positive pedagogical practices led by dedicated teachers, and these initiatives have been geared towards creating a positive platform for success even as they challenge or sidestep certain rules and regulations in the process.

Taken holistically and in context, these practices lay the foundation for the school's triumphs. The lessons that can be learned from Bhumi would recognize the need for dedicated, committed and trustworthy agents who are willing to make necessary sacrifices to ensure success. Local teachers with vested interests in the school coupled with a democratic decision-making structure that would account for everyone's views can counter the pitfalls and dangers inherent in deviant behaviour. Where the deviance is transparent and open for debate, different agents can check each other's behaviours. Supplementing deviant behaviour such as reallocating funds and reconfiguring hiring rules with personal altruism in time, effort, and resources can help create a new, more effective, and trustworthy system. The problems with deviant behaviour do not need further elaboration, but when the deviance is directed towards a common, collective goal that is participatory, inclusive, and deliberated, better outcomes are possible.

This experience particularly highlights the importance of checks and balances for the success of any system, deviant or otherwise. Not only did the teachers check each other's behaviours, but they also created an inclusive system that engaged students and parents as stakeholders. The school's awareness strategy placed it at the centre of the community's attention, and their decision to send their own children to Bhumi proved their belief in their project. Having established a proven track record that focused only on the school's best interests, Bhumi was allowed the leniency to bend rules in a system that is otherwise failing anyways, and the constituent communities do not censure them as long as their ends remain justified.

The Bhumi experience also provides a positive glimmer of hope, and a silver lining to the lack of accountability and transparency in the public school system. Whereas the outcomes are unfavourable in a large majority of cases, when the right agents are determined to make a positive difference in their communities, the lack of a functioning system can provide the space required to mould the system towards positive outcomes. The state's relative disinterest or incapacity to monitor and regulate school activities made it possible for teachers to extend their mandate, and the unique circumstances within which they operated ensured that such an extension yielded better outcomes. While the SMCs were introduced as an attempt to ensure accountability to parents, the infiltration of party politics into these committees has meant that election results are discussed in terms of "Which party won the election?" rather than "Which student's parent got elected?" Within this context, if the state were able to maintain a rigid stronghold in terms of funds use, hiring practices, and SMC elections, for instance, it is unlikely that the school could achieve the same level of success. While rare, the Bhumi case informs the circumstances necessary to capitalize, despite a failing system.

There is, however, some further cause for concern. The school's success has led to some problems because of the dangers of becoming a victim of its own success. As noted, the school's enrolment figures are rapidly on the rise, as more people from neighbouring communities are interested in sending their children to Bhumi. Given the restraints to material and personal resources, there is a danger that the teachers will not be able to keep up with the pace of the rise in enrolment. Part of the school's success rests on the teachers' ability to understand and manoeuvre the system, but if it grows beyond their control, the school might not be able to maintain its reputation and its academic record.

The problem is exacerbated by the perverse response that a success story can generate. Philanthropists, policy makers, politicians, reformers, and development experts often fall into the trap of looking for the most deprived or unsuccessful candidates to support, so the ones that manage their resources well often get overlooked. A European volunteer who had come to Nepal on a service trip and was helping students at Bhumi for a few weeks as a teacher was distressed because "the school is functioning so well that they don't need any help" (May 30, 2012) and constantly requested her contacts in Kathmandu to transfer her to a different, "more needy" school. A Nepali businessman looking for a philanthropic pet project visited various schools in the region over the summer, but ultimately decided that Bhumi was

doing well enough on its own, so decided to pour his funds into another school because they were mismanaged and their results were worse.

Even state organs discriminated against Bhumi at times because of their success. The Village Development Committee and the District Education Committee now provide discretionary grants to public schools to help them prepare for SLC exams. Most public schools in the region did not pass even 30% of their students, and so were awarded up to Rs 25,000 to help their preparation, whereas Bhumi was only granted Rs 12,500 because their results were already acceptable. The difficulty, cost, and personal sacrifice that had gone into ensuring these results were not taken into account when making these decisions, focusing instead only on the end product. Failure can thus become a requirement to receive support, creating a perverse set of incentives, whereas the successful become victimized precisely because of their achievements.

V. Conclusion

This chapter has provided a detailed account of the secondary schooling experience of Bhumi students. Bhumi has carved a powerful image of how a public community school can succeed despite the systemic challenges public schools face. The context and manner of Bhumi's success help inform key wider debates on public school education.

The extent of the effort and deviance required from empowered agents to ensure student success illustrate the structural failures of the wider school system. The central role of teachers in determining student outcomes is evidenced in these findings. Their sacrifice and commitment go beyond their job requirements, but the school's success depends on a level of dedication that is unlikely to be available everywhere. When a public school in the outskirts of the capital city can face chronic shortages in terms of material and human resources, it is not difficult to estimate the dire situation of public schools in more rural settings. The relative ease with which Bhumi teachers are able to manipulate school rules also demonstrate the lack of general accountability and transparency within the public school system. Without the presence of empowered agents in the form of teachers, students, parents, and local communities to provide these checks and balances, such a defunct system has consistently been proven to lead to poor public school outcomes.

These findings also demonstrate that outcomes are not entirely pre-determined. The meta-narrative in this thesis has focused on the challenges people from marginalized communities face, but this chapter illustrates that successful outcomes are possible under

some circumstances. The results of the (public school) system need not be accepted as a foregone conclusion without considering the actors concerned, even as lessons can be learned to make the system itself more effective for the poor. The resistance of Bhumi teachers plays a central role to help students succeed and differentiate themselves from their peers. The subtle adaptations at Bhumi further challenge the simplistic narrative of private school success or public school gloom, requiring instead an analysis that goes beyond structures to look at specific practices that support or hinder school outcomes.

There is great value in understanding why and how certain actors succeed in an otherwise faltering system. The success described in this chapter is tied closely to examination results, which have historically served as barriers for the poor because they attend public schools that have struggled to negotiate national exams. However, empowered actors at Bhumi have found ways to adapt to these structural constraints to achieve competitive results. The benefits of this success have direct implications for education's role as a positional good, because Bhumi's results differentiate its graduates favourably against other public school students *and* local private school students. The findings also suggest that the notion of school quality should not be limited to exam results but also account for dedicated local teachers, empowered parents and community members, adequate resources (even if they were sourced through deviant means), and locally accepted accountability and transparency measures.

At the same time, the transitional concerns of this thesis go beyond immediate school outcomes to also include people's life trajectories. A more encompassing lens is required to understand the broader processes and implications of Bhumi's engagement beyond SLC results, particularly in terms of learning outcomes and access to higher education and employment opportunities. The next two chapters thus consider these trajectories for Bhumi students and Dadagaun residents.

7. Higher Education in Limbo: Problems of Transition

I. Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that the success of Bhumi graduates is extremely short-lived, as they lack the economic, social, and cultural capital to adjust within the higher education system. The scope of the analysis so far has been limited to school outcomes as measured internally by the school system. While such an analysis is important to place the school's performance in context, this thesis extends the analysis to also include the life trajectories of Bhumi graduates beyond secondary schooling. The nature of their transition to higher education and employment provide powerful insights to the role and relevance of education in the era of mass schooling. The problems of transition to higher education demonstrate that exam results are not good markers of either success or education quality. High-achieving students from a well-established public school struggle to make the transition to higher education, highlighting the structural challenges people from marginalized communities face in meeting their aspirations.

I analyze here the systemic challenges Bhumi graduates face in accessing higher education (section two). I explain both why and how public school graduates overwhelmingly choose to attend private colleges, and outline the challenges they face in their pursuits. I then contextualize the results and experiences of Bhumi graduates in higher secondary education to show how even those who emerge as winners from the SLC become labelled as failures soon thereafter (section three). I investigate here the prominent role of various forms of capital in determining educational outcomes for the poor. Next, I document the higher education outcomes for Bhumi graduates to explore how these difficulties affect the performance of students (section four). I examine in this chapter the provision and subversion of egalitarian policies within education, the continued primacy of exams and school results in determining school and student success, and the central role of cultural capital in negotiating effective transitions to higher education.

II. Access to Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

The current education system divides secondary schooling into three groups: primary (class 1-5), lower secondary (class 6-8), and secondary (class 9-10). The intermediate level represents two years of higher education, followed by Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate

degrees. Bhumi students study till the SLC at the school but have to look for other alternatives to continue their education.⁸⁴

Although Bhumi provides a competitive alternative to private schools in the region at the secondary level, such options are not as easily available at the Intermediate level. The nature of the disparities between public and private schools at this level are perceived to be more pronounced than in secondary schooling because of private schools' advantages in resources, personnel, facilities, expectations, and opportunities. The prominence of international initiatives such as Millennium Development Goals and Education for All have ensured greater scrutiny and input into public schools at the primary and lower secondary level, but such emphasis is not evident in higher secondary institutes. For instance, the national budget on education is divided into pre-primary and primary education, secondary education, education not definable by level, and subsidiary services to education. In the 2012/13 fiscal year, 72% of the education budget was aimed at primary and secondary education, and only a portion of the remaining 28% was available for higher education. The Minister of Finance pledged in his 2014 budget speech (Mahat 2014) that a higher education policy would be implemented to manage higher education but the state did not even record higher education as a sub-category in the same budget. The lack of sustained engagement demonstrates the state's relative indifference to higher education.

The politicization of the public school system serves as another deterrent for many students to avoid public schools. As I discussed in the last chapter, public schools are already influenced by political parties through School Management Committees, but their involvement is even more direct in higher education. There is a long history of student politics in Nepal (see chapter three) and sister wings of political parties are active in higher education to recruit and influence young students. Higher education institutions thus serve as a ready platform for political activities. Public institutions are often disrupted by strikes called by different student leaders in response to various political decisions, whereas private schools are generally free of such interference. In the absence of good public schools with minimal political interruptions, Bhumi students find private schools as attractive options for further education. All twenty students who passed the SLC in 2012 wanted to continue their education at private schools because, as one student put it, "it would be impossible to find a

⁸⁴ I have published part of this analysis in Republica, an English daily in Nepal (http://www.myrepublica.com/portal/index.php?action=news_details&news_id=36962).

good public +2 school”.⁸⁵ According to the Principal of Bhumi, graduates look to enrol in private schools after Bhumi because “they think (as most people think) private schools are better” (personal correspondence, March 20, 2013).

Most parents at Bhumi cannot afford to send their children to private schools for higher education. These students come from extremely poor backgrounds, and most of them belong to historically marginalized communities, as I showed in chapter four. Their identity as members of these groups is important because the Higher Secondary Education Board (HSEB) provides scholarships to these officially defined ‘marginalized communities’. Ten of the twenty Bhumi students who passed their SLC this year were indigenous (*janajatis*), four of them Dalits, and the other six high-caste, but the socio-economic status of even these high-caste students mirrored their peers. The high-caste students thus faced the same challenges, which I show below, in pursuing higher education. Further, the cost of higher education is very high, even compared to private schooling at the secondary level.

On average, most of the private colleges cost between Rs 1,500 and 2,500 per month, depending on the faculty of choice. For instance, in the science stream, only 10 out of 92 private colleges charge less than Rs. 2,000 a month. These numbers do not include the steep admission and annual fees, or other associated costs (which I discuss in the next section).

Table 9 Cost of higher education by discipline

Stream	Number of Colleges	Average Monthly Fee in Rs. (Mean)	Middle-Value Monthly Fee in Rs. (Median)	Most Common Monthly Fee in Rs. (Mode)
Science	92	2656	2500	2500
Management	104	1935	1975	2000
Humanities	68	1580	1500	1500

This table was computed on the basis of the profile of 112 colleges in Kathmandu Valley, and published in *Republica* on June 19, 2012.

In a country where the average per capita monthly income is less than Rs. 4,000 (World Bank 2010), it is not possible for the poor to pay over 60% of their income towards one child’s higher education. In Dadagaun, the average family size is 4.7 people, so the needs of other family members would also have to be taken into account. For instance, Sumana

⁸⁵ +2, or 10+2, is the colloquial term used to refer to the Intermediate level, denoting two years of study after 10th grade (or SLC), equivalent to the two years of A levels in the UK.

Khadka secured a Distinction in the SLC and wanted to study science to become a doctor but the costs were prohibitive, limiting severely her ability to aspire towards that future. Her record demonstrated that she could be competitive academically, but the lack of financial resources prevented her from realistically considering pursuing her field of interest. With tears in her eyes, Sumana discussed her options with her parents and teachers and decided that she would study humanities, the cheaper option, instead. Her story is representative of most recent Bhumi graduates, who face similar constraints in making their decisions. Although most graduates have lofty dreams about pursuing professional degrees that would lead to well-paid jobs, as I document in the next chapter, their socio-economic constraints limit their prospects. Their education decisions are thus based on their personal circumstances rather than their interests or their abilities to succeed within the education system. The limits placed on people's opportunities already hold clues about how education serves as a tool for differentiation, to the detriment of the poor, and I build on this further over the course of the chapter.

HSEB provides some scholarships to disadvantaged students from public students to facilitate their higher education. The scholarships are administered through an examination conducted by HSEB. These examinations take place at particular centres throughout the country, and student results are organized to divide them into seven or eight groups based on performance. The results are published in the *Gorkhapatra*, the state-owned national daily, and each group has to report to the Ministry on particular days, based on their results, to confirm availability for their chosen schools.

All twenty students from Bhumi appeared for the exam and passed, making them eligible to get free education in private colleges in Kathmandu valley. These scholarships allow even poor students to realize their aspirations for private higher education, which they expect to lead to better future outcomes. However, numerous challenges hinder the process from beginning to end, highlighting the significant difficulties public school students face to claim even those benefits that are reserved for them.

The students have to substantiate their claims that they are disabled, Dalit, indigenous, or poor from their representative federations or national organisations (Chief District Officer's Office, which is the main bureaucratic unit of the state at the district level; National Dalit Commission; NEFIN; or national ethnic organisations such as Nepal Magar Association), and/or Village Development Committees (VDCs). However, they face regular

bureaucratic hurdles to ascertain those identities. At Bhumi, some of the students were not from Dalit or indigenous communities but were eligible for the seats reserved for the poor. However, the VDC kept making demands for different documents at different times, delaying the process significantly.

Many of the SLC graduates kept returning to the school because their organisations had not ratified their eligible status yet. NEFIN told Raju Tamang he had to prove his 'indigenous' status, even though his birth certificate as well as his SLC results clearly indicate he is Tamang, who are recognised by NEFIN as an indigenous group. Three students were returned by the VDC, who claimed that they were unable to verify their poverty status. The Principal wrote a 'recommendation letter' to NEFIN so that Raju would get his indigenous identity card, whereas Iswor (the Nepali teacher) had to go to the VDC and request a relative who worked there to give these students their 'poverty letter' so that they would be eligible for the HSEB scholarship exam. (Field notes, 13/7/2012)

The verification process was thus far from straightforward, and being a high-achieving member of one of the disadvantaged communities was not enough to ensure eligibility for the scholarship. Some of the minority ethnic organizations had been established as special interest groups with the explicit motive of helping their members, and it cost these organizations no money and very little effort to endorse the requests of students to verify their identity. Yet, on numerous occasions these organizations failed to act in the interests of the students. It is difficult to estimate why these organizations create hurdles for the students, but it is clear that relationships and social networks are necessary simply to participate in the scholarship process.⁸⁶ Although students themselves did not know any influential officials themselves, they depended on their school teachers to call on their networks to ensure that they had the right documentation for the scholarship exam.

The exam itself was poorly regulated, and Bhumi students reported that they were free to discuss or copy each other's answers, tainting the importance of such significant exams.⁸⁷ The results were published within days of the exam, allegedly to prevent undue influence and nepotism in admission practices. However, during my visit to HSEB, I overheard a conversation where an employee noted down her relative's details over the telephone and promptly made a call to another employee to guarantee the student a successful outcome from

⁸⁶ I spoke to numerous teachers and parents to find out their thoughts on why these students were not getting their endorsement letters easily. The only explanations they could come up with were that the officials were either just too lazy or personally knew other students competing for the same scholarship, so did not want to undermine their chances by giving many other students these endorsement letters.

⁸⁷ Cheating is very prevalent in Nepali exams, including in the SLC, as a cursory glance of newspapers and TV reports show. For instance, see Republica 2013a and Republica 2013b.

the upcoming exam. Although it was not possible for me to find out whether this student received the scholarship, the fact that the conversation took place in front of apparent strangers demonstrated the lack of concern for even the appearance of fairness and accountability in the exam process. It is clear then that personal networks play a role in mediating the ability to appear for these scholarship exams, even when students obviously belong to eligible groups. The incident at the HSEB also demonstrated that nepotism affects scholarship considerations.

Even when students manage to sit for the scholarship exams and secure the necessary results, the window of opportunity to guarantee their scholarship position is very small. As soon as the results are published, those students who perform the best and are eligible to pick schools first are expected to report to the district centres the very next day. The system does not take into account either the distance or the difficulty students from rural communities might face in meeting such unexpected, stringent deadlines. Many villages live in rural places where they do not even get newspapers on the day of publication, seriously undermining their ability to capitalize on the scholarship scheme. For those who make it to the centre on time, they nonetheless have to rely on a first-come first-serve basis, not their exam performance. Those who live close to the district headquarters and can thus get to the exam centres early get a clear advantage over villagers who have to walk or take a bus to get there. The first-come-first-serve system is also chaotic and presents possibilities for further cheating, as people with personal and political connections can manipulate scholarship outcomes in their favour, regardless of their exam results. The outcomes of the exam are thus not entirely meritocratic but depend on a number of pre-existing economic, geographical, and social conditions.

Two years ago, Prativa almost fell victim to these hindrances, and would have lost her scholarship had it not been for the intervention of her schoolteachers. Despite securing the highest marks among girls from community schools in the nation, and having passed the scholarship exam with distinction, the officials at HSEB declared that they could not find her file and so could not award her a scholarship. Her parents were not able to protest strongly, and they returned home dejected. When Chaitanya, Prativa's teacher who is also her neighbour, heard about this, he went to HSEB the next day and demanded to see the officials in charge. When he mentioned Prativa's name, an employee tried to hide her file but Chaitanya caught him on the act. He threatened to call the media and report the irregularities. Chaitanya used his political background, discussed in the previous chapter, to assert his

claims, ultimately leading to Prativa being awarded her scholarship. Once again, it is clear that social and cultural capital are extremely important for people to access even opportunities that are earmarked for them. The proctoring of entrance exams and a subsequent bureaucratic process of scholarship admissions give the facade of a meritocratic system, but personal connections continue to play a crucial role in mediating access to higher education through scholarships. Although Prativa was ultimately lucky, one can only wonder how many other public school students miss out on their scholarships because they either do not know the rules or do not have a powerful voice that compels the system to acknowledge them.

Receiving a letter of recommendation from HSEB to be admitted to a private college does not ensure admission for public school students as colleges find innovative ways to undermine the system. Rushna Thapa excelled in school despite difficult circumstances at home and aced her scholarship exam in 2012 to be awarded a recommendation to study Science at a prestigious college in Kathmandu.⁸⁸ She went to the college with her letter the same day but was not allowed even to enter the college, let alone get admitted. The college claimed that HSEB had issued more letters than seats available at the college, so she was not allowed to discuss her case with anyone, as the college gatekeeper was under strict instructions not to let anyone in. When repeated pleas fell on deaf ears, she returned to HSEB to seek a recommendation for a less prestigious college. Although she could potentially have fought for her place, the risk of not getting a scholarship for any college was too great for her to consider that option seriously. It appears to be common knowledge that colleges hold these scholarship seats for particular students, who are often related to college staff. Public school students who do not have the right connections are left to choose from the less desirable colleges even if they perform well in the exams. The *afno manchhe* syndrome Bista described in the 1990s remains as relevant as ever in Nepal. Once again, most of the students are unable to oppose the status quo by definition because they come from poor and/or marginalized communities, so they suffer the injustices of the system in silence.

⁸⁸ Her father left the family and is unofficially married to another woman, with whom he has started another family. Her mother supports the family by rearing a cow, as well as working as a casual wage labourer in the village.

III. Experiencing the system

The problems of transition are not limited to access. Various exclusionary policies, practices, and norms at private schools constantly breed a sense of exclusion among public school graduates that ultimately undermines their school performance.

a. Late Arrival

The process of contestation and negotiation has only begun when a student gains admission to a private college through these HSEB scholarships. The scholarship exam takes place after the beginning of the school year, meaning that most students will have already enrolled at various colleges. Without the assurance of an HSEB scholarship, public school students pay high admission fees and tuition deposits to book their place at various colleges. Colleges use this window to negotiate with students by offering discounts for early enrolment, enticing students to get admitted to take advantage of the financial incentives. When students pass the HSEB exam and are eligible for free education, their only hope of getting their early investment back is if they choose to remain at the school where they have already enrolled, even if that choice had been made for financial rather than academic reasons.

Even if students choose to use their scholarship offer at the school where they are already enrolled, they are often forced to forego fees they might have already paid the college. Sharad KC scored 75% in the SLC and sought to study Computer Science. He comes from a very poor family and he had to quit school for a few years to help his father, the family's breadwinner, who owned and ran a small canteen at a private college in Kathmandu. The business failed though, and the family returned to their village, after which his father encouraged him to return to his education. The financial burdens on the family increased, however, when his older brother was diagnosed with a mental illness. Most of their meagre income from farming is now diverted towards his brother's treatment, leaving very little for the rest of the family.

As the HSEB scholarship exam took place after the admission deadline for most colleges, Sharad enrolled at a second-tier college. The college gave him a substantial discount, so he secured his seat by paying Rs 5000 instead of Rs 16000 for his admission and first terminal tuition. Sharad would have preferred to wait for the scholarship exam, but the college further assuaged his worries:

They told me that they would refund my entire payment if I were able to secure an HSEB scholarship. They even promised me an administrative job to help fund my education, so I felt good about joining the college. (14/08/2012)

Sharad passed the HSEB exam convincingly, and could have selected a higher-ranked college for his education. However, since his father had borrowed money to get him admitted, he wanted to stay at the same college, partly because he could get the money returned. However, over the next month, he found that the college had no intention of returning his payment. The uncertainty of the delayed examination placed a serious financial burden, so Sharad had risked and lost Rs 5000, a significant sum for his family. He was never offered the job either, so he feels cheated by the college that failed to keep any of its promises. He wishes he had moved to another college when he was offered the scholarship, but he does not have that option anymore. The fact that Sharad is from a so-called high-caste group was meaningless in the context of his poverty and lack of social networks to be able to pressure the college.

The delay in holding the exam also serves as a marker for identifying selected students as ‘scholarship students from public schools’. If they move colleges, they enrol later than everyone else, and do not get to participate in the welcome or in orientation programmes. Kunti Thapa had waited for the scholarship exam after excelling in her SLC in 2012, so when HSEB offered her a scholarship, she was admitted to a top private college. Although the college accepted her documents, she was told that she could only join classes once she had been fitted with the school uniform. The college had begun its session two weeks before Kunti got admitted, and it took her another week to get her uniform tailored. A few other scholarship recipients from public schools faced the same difficulty, as they had to play catch-up from the beginning of the school session. Delayed HSEB exams thus place a significant burden on public school recipients, as they miss out on making friends and starting at the same level as other students. Many Bhumi graduates thus feel restricted in terms of the higher education opportunities available to them for these reasons.

b. Navigating New Spaces

Public school students are making a big transition when they pursue higher education in private colleges. The disparity between Bhumi and these private colleges, for instance, is most obvious through the difference in infrastructure. Whereas Bhumi barely has enough benches and tables to accommodate all students, private colleges pride themselves on and

advertise their modern facilities, science and computer labs, sports equipment and grounds, and other supporting amenities.

The transition from public school to private college is pursued for better quality education and upward mobility but the whole milieu changes for the students, often beyond their recognition. The new environment is intimidating for Bhumi students, as they have to navigate not only a higher curriculum but also a new, alien system to which they cannot relate their previous education experiences. Parvati Lama shared her experience from the first two months of 11th grade thus:

All the buildings here are so big. We have to pay money for computer lab, but I get scared to use the computer. I have not used it before, and I get scared if I somehow press the wrong thing and something bad happens. I am too scared.

Q: Can you ask someone to teach you at the school?

If you take Computer as an option subject then I think you can take classes. But I don't know anything about computers so it would be too risky. During free periods, many students go to use the computer lab. We could ask them, but what will they think if we don't even know simple things?

I have taken Physics instead, because at least I studied Science before in school. Here there are many facilities. We have to work in a lab twice a week to do experiments. The teachers are nice and they try to teach us but we don't know much. Our lab in the school was one small cupboard with a few things. In the beginning I did not even know the name of most of the things we had to use for our lab work. (10/26/2012)

This conversation demonstrates the difficulties some of the Bhumi students face in their new environment. Their lack of experience and exposure has left them at a decided disadvantage over most of their peers from private schools, who have already mastered these spaces. Bhumi students find it difficult to adjust to the distant and removed setting, and they often choose to withdraw from school activities rather than participate actively in this new environment. Kumud Tamang, another 2012 Bhumi graduate, reported to me:

We have a basketball court in our college. In fact, there are so many other things to play here. There are two badminton courts, a football field, and some other games as well. I like to play basketball but I am too shy. The boys here are *khatraa* (really good),⁸⁹ and they played for their school team before. We didn't have any sports teams before, so I thought I would want to play basketball in college. But I would rather not embarrass myself so I just watch them. At least we used to play in football tournaments for the village, so maybe I will try to play football next year. Let's see. (06/11/2012)

⁸⁹ The Nepali word he used, *khatraa*, means dangerous but is also slang for exceptional or really good.

It is thus clear that Bhumi students struggle to adapt to their new environment. Their life experiences have largely been limited to Dadagaun and Bhumi, so the new opportunities available through private schools are overwhelming to them. They lack the cultural capital to make the transition to higher education seamlessly, which prevents them from actively participating in college life.

Figure 12 Difference in infrastructure between public and private school



c. Lost fluency

The perception of exclusion is further accentuated by the language barrier that Bhumi students face in classrooms. Although Bhumi has increasingly moved towards instruction in English medium, most teachers do not have a good command over English so the move is largely symbolic. In any case, teaching at the secondary level continues to be in Nepali, so the transition to an English-medium college can be disempowering. College students said that they did not understand most of what went on in the classrooms, and they reported it took them over two months to understand the basics being taught.

The teaching is so fast. We try to keep up with everything but the class is very difficult. The course work itself is quite difficult, but when everything is in English we can't keep up. Even when we learned in English before [at Bhumi], the teachers would explain in Nepali. Here, that is not the case...it is in 100% English. (Rushna Thapa, 10/22/2012)

The severity of the language barrier was demonstrated when I asked Bhumi SLC graduates to read an English newspaper published in Nepal. The students, collectively, did not know the meaning of 14 of 19 words from the first sentence of a front-page newspaper article. Unsurprisingly, the students struggle to understand their coursework when their vocabulary is so basic.

The lack of fluency in English further prevents Bhumi students from asking questions or engaging with teachers. Most other students in these colleges, having come from private schools, have learned in English before, and so do not face the same challenges. Sumana Khadka, an 11th grade student who got a distinction in her SLC, remarked, "I could not even understand the questions in my college exam, so it was impossible to answer them." (10/05/2012). She failed three of her five courses in her first term of 11th grade, and she was not the only Bhumi graduate to fail either. The lack of cultural capital in the form of mastery of English language thus undermines schooling outcomes for public school graduates. The stars of the public school system were soon being branded as failures in the higher education system.

d. Cost of 'free' education

The cost of 'free' education is very high in Nepal, with serious consequences for poor students. Free education in the post-secondary level through the HSEB is in reality a waiver of admission and tuition fees, so students do not have to pay only the most direct costs of

their education. However, the indirect and opportunity costs of education are very high for them.

Table 10 Additional higher education costs at +2 level

Cost	One-off (in Rs.)	Monthly (in Rs.)	Termly (in Rs.)	Yearly (in Rs.)
Admission	Free	Free	Free	Free
Tuition	Free	Free	Free	Free
Exam fees			3000	9000
Lab fees			6000	18000
Library charges			1000	3000
Travel and Daily Allowance		3000		36000
Uniform	8000			8000
Books and Stationery	4000	500		10000
Total				84000

As the table shows, students are still expected to pay exam fees, lab fees (for those studying Science), and library charges to colleges, which amount to about Rs. 30,000. In addition, students have to buy their uniform, books, and stationery, which comes to another Rs. 18,000 a year. Since the first term charges are due at the start of the year, along with the one-off costs and the first month's expenses, parents are expected to pay about Rs. 25,000 in the first month.

Students from rural communities face further challenges in commuting to colleges, as it takes Bhumi students from Dadagaun up to two hours each way just to get to the school. Since public vehicles do not ply to the village, students walk about an hour to get to the nearest transportation, and have to take one or two buses to get to school. In addition to the time and effort that the commute requires, students and parents face the added financial burden for college attendance. As one parent lamented,

Even with the scholarship, attending the better schools is beyond our reach. We have to give them at least Rs 100 a day just for transportation and snack costs, which comes to about Rs 36,000 a year. That might be cheap for rich people, but we do not have that kind of money. (14/06/2012)

Further, some colleges find illegal ways to charge students more money. At a reputed college in Kathmandu, HSEB scholarship recipients were still forced to contribute Rs 3,000 to a 'Student Scholarship and Teacher Welfare Fund'. Although the contribution was marked

as voluntary on the form, parents were told in no uncertain terms that failure to pay that amount would cause problems for the students. Although most parents knew they were being swindled, they refrained from protesting because they feared repercussions for the students.

‘Free’ education can thus cost about Rs. 84,000 a year each year, which places a significant financial burden on poor students and their families. These hidden costs do not only manifest in financial but also social pressures, as students are forced to take up jobs to make ends meet. Many parents sell their land and their possessions as well as borrow money to pay for their children’s ‘free’ education. Arun Tamang, a casual labourer in Dadagaun, had already been forced to plan to find a way to cover his son’s education costs, even though he had received an HSEB scholarship.

My son has done well in the SLC so I have to make sure he can continue. I don’t have any money and I have already sold most of my land here. I had bought a bike with that money so I will sell it to pay for the first instalment of his fees. But there are so many other fees we have to pay time and again. Thankfully, I bought some land in [another city]...so I will go there to try and sell it. (18/07/2012)

While HSEB scholarships provide the most powerful bridge for public school students to access private colleges, they fell short of providing the necessary supportive environment required for public school students to flourish.

e. Policing Policy

College policies that appear innocuous often perpetuate inequalities by exerting undue pressures on students from rural communities. Many colleges adhere to a strict punctuality policy, and students are not allowed to attend class if they are late by even five minutes. For students who travel about two hours, using different modes of transportation across very difficult, hilly terrain, the commute is not always straightforward. The need for punctuality and the severity of the policy can be understood as ways to run classes smoothly, but students that rely on public vehicles have no control over their time of arrival. Parvati was late by ten minutes to reach her college one day in August, and she ended up returning home because she was scared of the punishment she expected from the school. She said,

It took me a long time to cook lunch, and by the time I had fed my brothers and sisters, it was already getting late. I ran all the way to Bajragaun [nearest bus stop] but I had to wait there for the bus. Luckily there was no traffic jam but I was already late. The Discipline Incharge had warned us that if we are late by even five minutes, we should just go back home. It was also Science Lab day so we would have class for longer, so it was important for me to go to school. I was too scared so I came back and had to miss school, even though I went all the way there. (17/09/2012)

Parvati's quote is a reminder that Bhumi graduates continue to combine school and work, which is not always easy. Further, the school policy on late arrival directly prevented Parvati from learning, even though she went to the school.

There are a number of similar school policies which place undue burden on students with limited means and resources. Most schools prohibit students from bringing mobile phones or torches to college. Once again, the policy might seem reasonable in isolation, as student use (and abuse) of mobile phones in colleges can provide regular distractions. However, for Dadagaun students who have to walk a significant distance, often in the dark, to get to college each way, these policies seriously limit their access to education. Another 11th grade student explained the predicament:

When we have Science Lab, our school only finishes at 5 pm. We don't get bus back on time sometimes, so by the time we reach Bajrangaun it is already dark. We have to walk almost an hour to get to Dadagaun, including through a small forest. I have seen a tiger myself in this area, and we get very scared in the dark. We cannot take mobile or torch to college, so we don't have any light. Sometimes the college says they will store our mobile but if it gets lost they will not replace it. We already feel embarrassed coming from public school, so it is more embarrassing to carry a torch to school. During winter months, we have to leave at 4 a.m. to reach on time for morning classes. So we face many difficulties but the college people who live in city do not even realize. (10/10/2012)

Dadagaun students thus face an undue burden from school policies that appear innocuous at the outset. Their problems are not always recognised, let alone addressed, which leaves them feeling frustrated and left out, with serious implications for their educational achievements.

IV. The Outcome

This concerted branding of public school students as 'different' has a clear effect on student performance, with many Bhumi students regularly failing their college exams. The experience of the first batch of SLC graduates (2010) from Bhumi sheds light on the outcomes of this engagement with higher education. They are the first students from Bhumi to have completed their Intermediate level, and the table below charts their trajectory.

Table 11 Progression of Bhumi graduates (2010) in higher education

Gender	SLC	11th grade	12th grade	Current Status
Female	78%	61%	64%	Bachelor in Business Studies (BBS), first year
Female	74%	52%	46%	Married
Female	73%	59%	54%	BBS first year
Male	72%	57%	53%	Guard, now unemployed
Male	68%	Fail (1 subject)	N/A	Kitchen Helper
Female	67%	58%	53%	BBS first year
Male	65%	47%	Fail (3 subjects)	Repeat exam preparation
Female	61%	51%	53%	BBS first year
Male	59%	48%	Fail (4 subjects)	Employed
Female	56%	49%	Fail (1 subject)	Preparation for XII board exam
Female	54%	Drop out	N/A	Married

Table 12 Summary overview of Bhumi graduates (2010) after two years

Current Status	Number of Students
Continued to pursue Bachelor's degree	4
Did not complete 11th or 12th grade	5
Quit school after getting married	2

Eleven students from Dadagaun had completed their SLC from Bhumi in 2010, and they had been ecstatic at the opportunity to pursue further education. All of them were the first in their family to pursue higher education, with most of them also being the first literate people in the family. However, only five of these students completed their Intermediate level, and four of them have continued to pursue a Bachelor's degree. Because of the numerous problems outlined in the previous section, most students were unable to perform well over the years. One student did not complete 11th grade and got married while another student failed the 11th grade final exam and dropped out. Four students failed their 12th grade exam, only one of whom is continuing with their education. One student passed 12th grade but chose to get married rather than continue with further education. The survival rate from secondary schooling was thus very low.

In addition to the low pass rate, the performance trend is also disconcerting. No student has come close to replicating their performance in secondary school, with only one student managing a first division, down from eight during the SLC. The overwhelming trend is a decline in percentage in each subsequent year, indicating the greater difficulties students face in higher education.

The findings can be disaggregated further by gender, as the only four people who have been employed have all been men. More female students have remained in school, but those that dropped out are now married. The few employment opportunities that have been available (to men) involve low-level work that is not satisfactory to those that hold them.⁹⁰

The results might not be as expected for Bhumi graduates, but they appear consistent with national trends at the Intermediate level. According to HSEB, only 40.38% of students who appeared for 11th grade final examinations passed in 2012 (Rauniyar 2013). The figures are even more alarming for 12th grade, with only 38.58% of students that took the 12th grade examinations passing in the last year (Republica 2013). In comparison, about 42% of Bhumi SLC graduates passed the Intermediate level last year.

Although the national +2 results cannot be broken down to reflect the performance of public school graduates in the Intermediate level, some extrapolations demonstrate the severity of the problems at stake. Even assuming that students that appeared for the SLC from public schools perform at the same level as their private school counterparts in the college level, the outcome trend of their education pursuit is alarming.

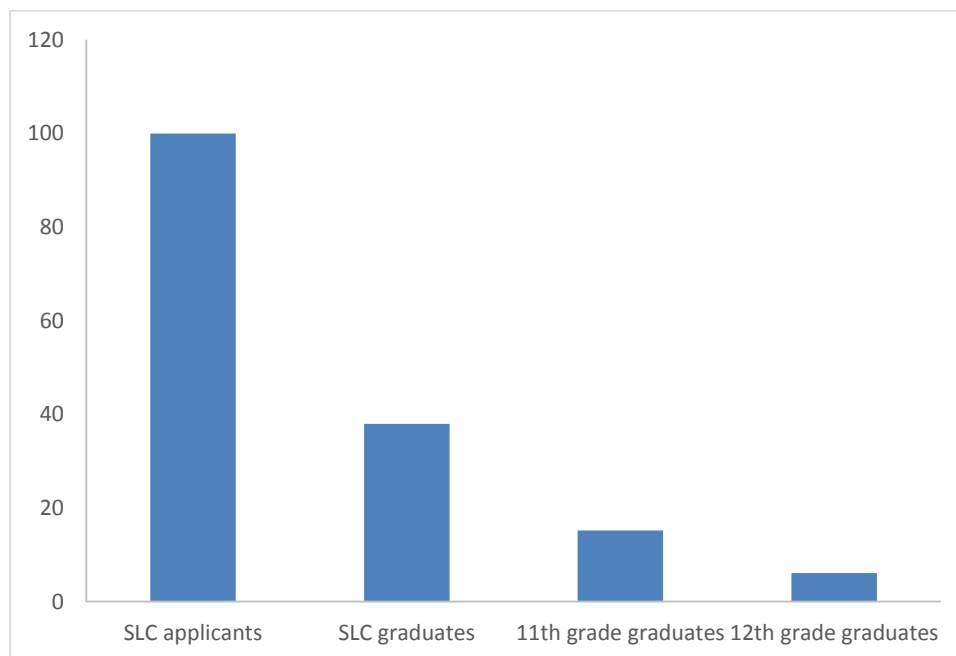
Out of 100 public school students that apply for the SLC, 38 students pass that exam. According to the national averages, if these 38 students appear for 11th grade exams, only about 15 students would pass these HSEB exams (40% of 38 students). If these 15 students then appeared for 12th grade exams, only about 6 students (40% of 15 students) would pass their Intermediate level without failing. While Bhumi graduates' success rate appears noteworthy in comparison, the current education system labels 94% of young, aspirant students from public schools at the cusp of navigating formal schooling as failures within a small, two-year window.⁹¹ These extrapolations do not even take into account the high failure

⁹⁰ The next chapter addresses the relationship with employment in greater detail.

⁹¹ This is a rather simple interpretation that does not take into account important facts like retention and dropout rates. Further, all the evidence discussed earlier in the chapter points to lower outcomes for public school students in comparison to the national average. Not all students who fail the SLC or 11th grade the first time drop out either, and many of them pass in further attempts to appear for higher exams the next time. However,

and dropout rate in primary and secondary schooling before the SLC, so these outcomes are extremely unimpressive.⁹²

Bar Graph 3 Projected performance of public school students in higher education



Examinations thus clearly serve as gatekeepers within the education system, determining who progresses further to tertiary education. The implications are two-fold for public school graduates. First, they have not learned enough to even be able to negotiate the school system. Second, their failure ensures that they are unable to acquire the higher education credentials they desire to be more competitive in the job market. School exams thus symbolize the barriers public school students face both qualitatively and quantitatively in their pursuit of higher education and gainful employment.

Part of the problem lies with the fallibility of the SLC as a marker of success. As Bhatta outlines in detail in his analysis of the SLC examination,

...the SLC exams have been routinely criticized for their lack of technical quality, the way exam papers are scored by different examiners, and the way the exams are

even under best case scenarios where the public student outcome is consistent to national statistics, it is clear that the results are dismal as 94% of students end up being labelled as failures by the system.

⁹² Elvira Graner (1998, 2006) has documented differential educational outcomes based on geography and gender, but her analysis focuses exclusively on primary and secondary schooling. My projections here focus instead on the higher education level, but these projections remain consistent with Graner's broader findings. Ram Acharya (2014) has used a similar method to calculate pass rates in primary and secondary education in Nepal. He finds that only 4.4% of all students enrolled in first grade in 2004 pass the SLC without failing a single year or dropping out.

administrated under varying conditions in different exam centers and in different parts of the county. (Bhatta 2005: 3)

Bhatta further highlights that those who develop the exams are not well trained to test the analytical and problem-solving skills of students. These tests are especially unreliable tools to compare results for students across social, economic, and geographical differences. As I have shown in the past two chapters, even exceptional success in the SLC is not a reliable indicator of school performance in subsequent years. The tools and processes used to mark the exam papers are also marred by negligence and incompetency (Yonjan 2013). Further, the exams test the ability to recall facts and formulae rather than the ability to creatively apply the knowledge students have acquired to analyze and solve problems (Bhatta 2005). As a response, in the name of exam preparation, schools urge students to memorize answers and reproduce them in exams rather than understand them to be able to solve similar questions in the future. Every year, hundreds of thousands of model questions, past paper answers, and guess papers get sold to SLC students to facilitate this preparation. During exam time, the media reports widely on parents and students smuggling cheats and answer guides into exams and copying them, undermining the purpose of these exams (Republica 2013a, 2013b). Bhumi students admitted openly that they tried, and often succeeded, to cheat from each other during the SLC exams. The problem goes further than testing to then raise questions also about preparation, where emphasis on SLC success is detracting from rather than facilitating the pursuit of analytical and problem solving skills.

V. Conclusion

The many constraints Bhumi students face in their pursuit of higher education highlight the complexities that hinder rather than support student learning outcomes. Students flock to private colleges in the hopes that their education will transform their lives. HSEB's scholarships for indigenous, poor, marginalized and disabled students bridge the financial gap on the surface, but closer examination demonstrates the structural obstructions that hinder these students from accessing higher education at every level.

Even when students persevere, inherent difficulties in the form of infrastructure, language, cost, and policy continue to marginalize public school students. Their lack of cultural capital seriously undermines their schooling outcomes, as their public school experience is not enough to facilitate their transition. Their higher education experiences highlight the poor performance that leads to most students deemed successful at the secondary level to be labelled as failures thereafter. Even as more and more students from

poor and marginalized communities turn to education as the answer, then, they find it difficult to navigate the system and are rejected within it.

The structural strength of the school, described in detail in the previous chapter, has thus not translated effectively into sustained gains for students when they transition to higher education. The assessment has remained internal, as these performances have mostly relied on outcomes measured by the school and the education system. However, when a system measures success primarily through a central examination, the problems and learning outcomes before or after that exam go unnoticed. Even successful Bhumi graduates face significant constraints that undermine their performance within the school system. The hype of success reaches a crescendo before crashing, as many of them soon become labelled as failures. The SLC continues to be considered the primary marker of student and school success, but these outcomes demonstrate that exam results are poor indicators of success even within the [higher] education system. This finding is more poignant because if high-achieving students from an acclaimed public school are facing such challenges, it is not difficult to imagine the results for students from most other public schools who do not even get similar opportunities.

These findings further contribute to a broader understanding of how the education system perpetuates inequality. The lack of economic, social, and cultural capital directly undermines education outcomes for public school graduates. The difficulties in managing the horizontal transitions between home, work, and school undermine their possibility for vertical transitions through the education system. The expectation of transformation through formal schooling, as expressed in chapter five, thus comes under scrutiny, as the experience of the education system is also dependent on a person's initial condition.

The conceptualization of education quality cannot be limited to internal measures of success. As this chapter shows, the socio-economic background of students, the language of instruction, and the inclusiveness of the education system contribute directly towards education outcomes, so must be considered integral to our understanding of the quality of education.

Bhumi's success thus rests on the scope of the analysis, which is dependent on the different opportunities and constraints its graduates face at different moments in their lives. As I show here, broadening the scope to analyze school outcomes after the SLC leads to serious questions about learning outcomes at the school, despite the systemic strength of the

school. The next chapter will widen the scope even further by contextualizing the education system in the broader political economy to assess their transitions to gainful employment.

8. Disrupted Trajectories: Dadagaun Employment

I. Introduction

Having discussed the aspirations, expectations, and experiences of education for Bhumi graduates and Dadagaun residents in the last three chapters, this chapter will describe their employment aspirations and realities. The analysis focuses in turn on recent SLC graduates, Dadagaun youth, and the general Dadagaun populace to demonstrate the diversity of employment experiences and outcomes. In this chapter, I investigate people's transitions to labour markets by looking at education backgrounds as well as social and cultural capital that support or hinder employment trajectories. These experiences demonstrate further the role of education in shaping people's expectations and illustrate their conceptions of meaningful employment. I explore here the role of education as a tool to differentiate the aspirations for modernity in contrast to rural and village life. The findings in this chapter inform the final piece of the critique of the life-stages model based on a multi-dimensional understanding of transitions.

I argue here that the employment aspirations and expectations for recent Bhumi graduates have been shaped largely by their academic performance (section two). I focus next on the experiences of young Dadagaun residents who have completed at least their higher secondary education (12th grade) and are continuing their education further or have accepted employment opportunities, or both (section three). I also disaggregate the findings by gender to analyze how education and employment outcomes are different for males and females. I contextualize these findings in relation to the overall employment pattern for the village (section four). I investigate here the employment patterns for Dadagaun residents and examine the role of social networks in determining outcomes. I explore the growing prominence of international migration in the region and discuss subsequent implications for education aspirations and experiences. I then provide a discussion of employment trajectories and explore the relationship between educational experiences and employment outcomes (section five).

II. Student Employment Aspirations

The aspirations of Bhumi graduates demonstrate the myriad expectations, frustrations, and contradictions that young people face in Nepal. Their success at the secondary school level has given them the confidence to pursue higher education. They set themselves high goals and expect their education to make a meaningful difference in their lives.

Muna Shrestha was one of the four students to secure a Distinction in the SLC in 2012. She attended a local primary school till 4th grade before having to move to Bhumi.⁹³ Her family's only source of income was subsistence farming until her father was able to pay an agent to move to Oman four years ago. She does not know what her father does in Oman, but he comes back every couple of years.⁹⁴ Her father sends money to the family a few times a year, but the amount they receive is neither regular nor substantial. In the meantime, her joint family, which includes her grandparents, her mother, and a younger brother, farm their small plot of land to earn a living. Her mother often brews and sells local alcohol (*jaand*) to villagers to supplement her income. The family also collect firewood from the hilly forests to sell to the nearby city, as do many other villagers in Dadagaun.

Muna worked extremely hard over the years to excel in her studies. Her Distinction in the SLC is a matter of great pride for her family as well as her villagers, and they place high expectations on her future. Muna was confident about what she needed to do to realize those ambitions:

I have to study, I have to work really hard. If I work hard, I will get very high grades, and a lot of percentage, and then things will be good. If we study well, then we will get jobs for sure. (01/11/2012)

She wants to continue her education for as long as possible, and is confident that if she does well, she will be able to transition successfully to meaningful employment.

Q: What do you want to do in the future?

Muna: I want to study CA.

Q: What does that mean?

Muna: Chartered Accountant.

Q: OK. So what do you have to do to become a CA?

Muna: I have to study a lot.

Q: Do you know what you have to study?

Muna: No. I know I have to study a lot, but that's all.

Q: OK. So what does a CA do?

Muna: I am not exactly sure. I think they work in banks. (pause) Is that right, sir?

Q: Yes, they can work at banks too. So why do you want to become a CA?

Muna: (long pause) It is a good job. It will pay well. And I would like to work in a bank some day.

⁹³ The local primary school could only teach till 4th grade, after which students had to move elsewhere to continue their education.

⁹⁴ Foreign migration is a major avenue for employment, and will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Muna is considered a bright person by her teachers and her villagers, and she is hopeful about her future. However, she is extremely concerned about her family's ability to fund her education. Further, it appears that she is completely unaware about what the process of becoming a Chartered Accountant entails, and what she will have to do to pursue such a career. Nonetheless, emboldened by her SLC success, she is confident that further education and her hard work will open doors for her in the future. Given her academic success, she does not want to go abroad to work, but she is hopeful that she might be able to pursue higher education opportunities in foreign countries, especially if she can maintain her academic success.

Rushna Thapa, whom I introduced in chapter four, is another recent SLC graduate with high employment aspirations. She grew up under difficult circumstances, as her father left the family to marry another woman about ten years ago. Rushna used to attend a local private school until lack of funds forced her to move to Bhumi seven years ago. Her problems were not just limited to a financial shortfall, however, as she also felt emotionally let down by her father's failure to be a part of her life. The day after her SLC results were announced, for instance, she was in tears because her father did not call her to acknowledge her achievement. She does not know what her father does any more, and even when they meet, he barely talks to her.

Despite these difficulties, Rushna remains hopeful of a successful career, bolstered by further education opportunities. She missed out on a Distinction by a few marks, but this has strengthened her resolve to perform even better in the future. She wants to study science at a reputed private college because "the education is better there". She was not sure what 'better' education meant, except that "everyone says it is good there, that's why". When asked what she wants to do in the future, she said,

I want to be a doctor. (Why?) In our village, people still believe in superstitions (*andhabiswas*). I want to teach them that you shouldn't believe in these things. I want to start my own clinic in the village and provide service to the villagers. Only once the village is ready can we do other things, and then after my own village is good then I will do good for the country as well. Right now, we do not even have a clinic in our own village, so we have many problems.

This quote demonstrates that Rushna wanted to secure a professional job that would allow her to serve her own community. At the same time, her comment illustrates that educational aspirations are not only geared towards getting better jobs and higher income but also on leaving the village's old ways and becoming more 'modern'. Those pursuing

education thus did not only envision their personal transformation but of the wider society as well. For instance, Kumud Tamang, a 17-year-old SLC graduate, expressed his hopes thus:

Our village still does not have any proper roads. We do not have any public vehicles [that come] here and during monsoon season, the few people with motorcycles struggle to ride to work because of the condition of the road. I want to study so that I can become an engineer. I will build proper roads for the village, and I also want to build bridges in other places. I want to help villagers so that they can get more opportunities. (07/12/2012)

These examples thus show the high aspirations students derive from education, both for themselves and for their communities. They also aspire to get white-collar jobs in the city and believe that “studying a lot” will get them these positions. However, as I argued in chapter five, their pursuit of education is not easy. For instance, Rushna faced severe financial shortcomings during her schooling days, and many Bhumi teachers had to chip in to make sure she had the resources to graduate from high school. The road to medical school is extremely expensive, as it can cost Rs 3,600,000 (about £25,000) or more to complete a medical degree, meaning that medical students come overwhelmingly from middle-class and upper-caste families. Even other higher education degrees are many times more expensive than the extremely low costs of attending Bhumi. There are some scholarships available, but these are limited and, given the severe challenges most public students face in their pursuit of higher education, it is unlikely that Rushna will be able to access these opportunities. She remains hopeful that she can get a “good education” and become a doctor, but such an outcome is nowhere near a certainty in the immediate future by her own admission.

Not all Bhumi graduates hold similar high ambitions. Rajesh Tamang performed extremely well in his SLC, getting the highest mark not only at Bhumi but also amongst all public schools in the five Village Development Committees (VDCs) in eastern Lalitpur. His journey has involved a number of highs and lows. According to Ishwor, a teacher at Bhumi, Rajesh had to ‘run away’ from his home and live in the forests to prepare for the SLC, as the environment at home was not conducive for his studies. Rajesh confirmed this:

My father had chased me away after getting drunk, so that was a problem with my preparation. I left home and lived in an empty hut.⁹⁵ If there was a fight at home, I would go there. The fight would be about very small things, but when he would get drunk he would get mad, and bring up many issues from the past and fight. (06/08/2012)

⁹⁵ The empty hut was owned by a *sahu*, or an outsider who had bought land in the village. *Sahus* usually do not live in the village but often build small houses or outposts on their properties.

It was evident that his parents drank alcohol almost daily, and they fought a lot throughout the time I was in the village. These ‘disagreements’ often involved physical violence, and would usually lead to serious altercations. Rajesh as well as his younger brother and sister were regularly caught up in these fights, and villagers noted that these were common recurrences for the past few years.

Rajesh’s parents do not hold secure jobs; his father works as a casual labourer in the village. Their financial situation changed drastically around 2008, when land sale was very common in Dadagaun. Previously barren land that was of little value suddenly became prime real estate, as Kathmandu dwellers looked for suburbia in the outskirts of the city. The immediate influx of wealth had serious repercussions in this household. They used the money they acquired from their land sale to build a concrete house in the small piece of land they retained for themselves. Rajesh’s father bought a motorcycle, and there was plenty of spending money for everyone in the family. Whenever there were any disagreements among themselves, villagers recalled, the family turned to their newfound wealth for solutions. Such ‘problem solving’ worked while the money lasted, but the lavish spending was not sustainable. As the money ran out, domestic quarrels resurfaced and became more pronounced. The wealth is all but gone now, with the family resorting to selling many of the possessions they bought a few years ago to make ends meet. Domestic violence has become the norm again.

Despite these problems, Rajesh persevered to excel in the SLC. However, his career path thereafter is marked with uncertainty. A few days after the SLC results were published, he was pleading with his father to sell his motorcycle so that he could give him Rs 50,000 (about £350) for his higher secondary education. Rajesh said he would somehow complete two more years of his education and then go abroad to work thereafter. He confirmed his dilemma during an interview later that year:

My economic situation is going to be a serious problem. That’s probably it. In the family, parents are saying that after 12th grade I should go abroad to work. They want me to study those things that other people study till 12th grade to be able to get job after that. They tell me in angry voice that I should not study big, expensive things but rather think about working abroad. So that’s the pressure.

This quote exemplifies the dual aspirational paths, based on education or migration, available to young Dadagaun residents, and I will discuss this further in the next section. Yet, despite his academic success, Rajesh seems resigned to the fact that he will have to seek menial employment to make ends meet. He does not believe that his education will help with future employment:

Q: Do you think your education will help with future employment? Why or why not?

Rajesh: No. It will not help me.

Q: Why not?

Rajesh: I have not seen anyone who has gotten employment of that kind.

Q: What do you mean?

Rajesh: In the village, I have not heard or seen anyone who has gotten such opportunities—good opportunities—because of their studies. I don't think my studies will get me a job either.

There was thus a clear sense of resignation that future employment prospects would not be enhanced by education outcomes, because there was no such example in the village. Jeevan Pathak, who is an SLC graduate and works as a helper in a restaurant now, shared his experiences with me:

I applied to work for the Agriculture Development Bank a few years ago. 1,599 people had applied, and I was still called for an interview. In the final round, there were about 20 people left...so I was in the top 20, but they only hired 10 people. But I did not get the job because I could not pay the right people. In Nepal's context, I don't think schooling leads to jobs. It is all about power and money here.

During the interview, they [the bank staff] asked me how many *elephants* I would put on the table.⁹⁶ But economic condition is the main thing. I said "elephants cannot climb trees so I cannot put them on the table." I did not feel like giving money either. Maybe if I had pushed my family, they might have made sacrifices to get the money together, but I did not think it would be fair for one son [me] to use all the money. (11/01/2012)

I could not verify Jeevan's claims independently, but his story nonetheless helps identify a few key themes and perceptions about the role of education in securing employment. The competition for employment is fierce, with the demand for jobs far outstripping supply. Employment agents often demand bribes from potential employees, seriously limiting the opportunities for poor people who cannot afford to make such payments. As I show in the next two sections, social networks also affect these employment outcomes.

Even those like Muna and Rushna, who are more hopeful of their future prospects, face severe constraints in their pursuit of gainful employment. The challenges they face in navigating higher education successfully further complicate the situation. Bhumi graduates may have succeeded in high school and many of them may even hold on to high aspirations,

⁹⁶ Each thousand rupee note (roughly £7) has an image of an elephant on it, so the recruitment official was asking for a bribe.

but whether their expectations will be met in their employment trajectories remains to be seen.

III. Youth Experiences

It is increasingly the norm that more and more young people stay in school during their teenage years. In Dadagaun, for instance, I have shown in chapter five that only nine people between the age of 20 and 30 in the entire village had attended less than five years of schooling. Although these students attend school, they also work long hours outside school. While most people under the age of twenty are enrolled in education institutions,⁹⁷ this is not always the case for young adults after higher secondary schooling.

Sandeep Thapa Magar, 22, was one of a handful of people from Dadagaun to attend a local private school. His father has been employed as a driver in Kathmandu for the last few decades, and his family were able to save enough to send Sandeep and his siblings to the private school. He believes that Bhumi, the local community school, is just as good as ‘boarding’ schools,⁹⁸ but his family insisted that he attend the private school.

After completing his 12th grade, he enrolled to pursue a Bachelor’s degree. However, he quickly found that he was struggling to make ends meet, and had to continually bother his family to cover his daily expenses. He attended a training programme for graphic design at a computer institute owned by a former employer of his father’s, and he was told that they had a vacancy at the training centre. He applied for and was offered a position as a computer teacher, but he believes his contacts ensured him the job.

Nobody gives jobs to people like us for no reason. These days you have to know someone to get anything. I went to training but there were so many others who were there too. Why would they give it to me without *source force*?⁹⁹

At the institute, he teaches schoolchildren and maintains the hardware for his employers. The job is demanding, and he is expected to work about 70 hours a week. His father bought him a motorcycle, bringing down his commute to two hours each day. However, the pressures of the job as well as the long hours have meant that he no longer has time to continue his studies. He was already disillusioned, as the course work was sporadic

⁹⁷ At the post-secondary level, ‘enrolled’ is the operative word: i.e. students rarely actually attend school but just turn up to take the exams at the end of the year.

⁹⁸ In Nepal, private schools usually use the tag ‘English Boarding School’ and are commonly referred to as ‘boarding’ or ‘boarding school’, even though there are no facilities for boarding.

⁹⁹ The Nepali-English phrase *source force* refers to the influence and social networks people use to secure personal favours in professional settings.

and teacher as well as student attendance dismal. He remained enrolled in the course for about a year, but finally dropped out towards the end of 2012.

Schooling is not useful for employment at all. I don't think it is important. It is somewhat useful for me, but the people who give jobs, they don't really value these degrees. You have to be able to do the job itself. They don't really care about any other qualifications. You need connections to get anything, and there is no point in continuing with my degree. If I keep studying till a high level, then maybe I can get higher kind of jobs...higher level job, but I am stopping now because I cannot study any more.

Sandeep thus had some sense of hope of gainful employment through education, but thought it required many more years of higher education. The various opportunities and constraints he faced prevented him from continuing his education, however, and he had to contend with what he called a "medium" job:

The work is very boring, and I make very little money. I am not satisfied at all. This is not enough money for the work based on the effort I put in. I make in total about Rs 12,000 a month, but I should get at least Rs 20,000. I am gone from early morning to late evening, and the pay is barely enough to even pay for petrol and the food I eat while working. But we have no one, and I have not studied either, so what can I do? I have to keep doing this job and be content.

Sandeep thus wanted to secure a good job, which to him meant a job that paid well. Even though he was one of very few people of his age formally employed, he was not satisfied with his current position, especially because his pay was barely enough to make ends meet.

Dilli Adhikari, a 22-year-old Bachelor of Arts student, faced very similar circumstances in his education and employment pursuits. He had been looking for paid work for the last two years without success. His father is retired from the Nepali army and is now a security guard in Qatar. He lives with his mother and two sisters, and considers himself the "man in the family". His mother takes care of the livestock as well as their farm land, while his two younger sisters are still in school. Although he is enrolled in a college, his attendance throughout the year was extremely low. He claimed that he could not really learn anything in college any more:

Dai, what is the point of going to college? They barely teach anything. The teachers are never there, and the students do not care either. I have also become lazy because I don't want to pay attention. When you apply for jobs, you have to either know someone or you have to bribe someone. They ask for your degree, but without money or power, there is no point of studying. (08/16/2012)

Dilli had remained enrolled in higher education in the hope that he would be able to get a good job, but he seemed resigned to the fact that his education was unlikely to help him secure employment. He acknowledged that the credential he would receive if he completed

his degree might be beneficial for his future, but he placed very little value on the knowledge he might be able to gain from his education. Although he helped his family with household work, his work load did not limit his ability to attend school. Yet, his indifference to his current education did not reflect a lack of ambition.

I want to do something. I want to be someone. I want to get a good job...maybe an office job that pays well, so that I can take care of my family. I want to develop the country and do something for my village too.

This quote shows that he had high ambitions, even though he was unsure how he would achieve these goals. For Dilli, and many others like him, a good job was closely tied to white-collar office work that provided a regular salary. Dilli had applied to a few banks, financial institutions, and non-governmental organizations, but he had not even been called for another interview for any of these positions. In his desperation, he was even willing to give up his desire for an office job, so he applied to join the Army for two years in a row:

I have tried for two years now, and although I passed the first test both times, I have not reached the final round. If I could get into the army, at least it would be a proper job, a job that people would respect me for. Now, it is not dangerous either because there is no war, so even army would be good. But I don't know anyone high up in the army. There is so much intense competition for these positions, and if you don't know anyone, you have no chance. There is no hope for people like us in this country, because there is no one to speak for us. (09/22/2012)

The need for social networks thus becomes clearer as young Dadagaun residents struggle to find satisfying opportunities. As a poor person without the right connections, Dilli feels that he is unlikely to get a good job. He is considered a member of a high-caste group because he is a Chhetri, but he is also a poor person without the right connections. Sandeep, Dilli, and many other young Dadagaun residents feel a sense of overwhelming frustration because of the limits to their opportunities. Thus, every evening, young people in their twenties get together at the tea stalls or the football ground and lament the terrible state of the country that disempowered them. They discuss the serious personal and structural obstacles that prevent them from either pursuing or succeeding in higher education, and how they do not have the right connections to find employment.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ These experiences of widespread frustration and disappointment among young, educated youth are not unique to Dadagaun or Nepal but have been documented around the world. See, for instance, Jeffrey 2010 for India and Katz 2004 for Sudan. Guy Standing (2012, 2014) has built on the argument more generally in his analysis of the emergence of a new group, which he calls the precariat, who have acquired education credentials but are overworked, underpaid, or unemployed, leading to widespread frustration and disillusionment.

Given the frustrations young people face in their employment pursuits, the most obvious escape that many of them dream is to go abroad for employment. According to Sandeep,

Yes, I want to go abroad. (Why?) To earn money....wherever I can go to earn more money I will go to do that. My main target now is to go to Dubai, and try to get a job in the computer field, maybe in graphic designing. That is my main thinking. I have to apply, and hopefully they will accept me. There is no point living in this country for people like us. We have nothing here.

Sandeep has not been able to find any satisfactory employment opportunities either in Nepal or abroad yet. The extent of Sandeep's frustration became evident when he sought my advice one evening. "*Dai*, I have this offer to go abroad. To America."¹⁰¹ It looks like all my troubles will be sorted out now."

When I asked him how he intended to go to the US, he said that he had talked to an agent. He would have to pay about Rs 1 million, and the agent would first take him to Mexico by boat, and then smuggle him to the US. When pressed, he further reported that the agent had also guaranteed him a well-paying job in the US. Sandeep did not know if the agent had any connections to legitimate partners either in Mexico or the US, but it seemed unlikely. The entire process was illegal and the agent admittedly said "you take all the risk". Yet, a 22-year-old employed Bachelor's student was considering paying a fortune (that he did not have but would have to borrow) to a shady agent with no track record or legal permission to smuggle him to the US and secure him a job. The alternative, to stay in his village and continue to look for better jobs, looked so dismal that he was willing to look for any outlet possible, no matter how difficult, dangerous, or unrealistic.¹⁰² This desperation for out-migration resonates with some of Alpa Shah's (2006) findings in Jharkhand, where villagers move to work in the cities not only for economic freedom but also because they are keen to escape their precarious circumstances at home.

The situation is poignant especially because Sandeep's desires, not unlike many others his age in Dadagaun, are fairly grounded. Like Dilli, he claimed he just wanted a 'good job', which he defined as "where I only have to work during office time of 10 to 5, and I get a satisfying enough salary...that's it really." Although young Dadagaun residents often have

¹⁰¹ Almost all Dadagaun migrants go either to Asian countries or to the Middle East in search of employment. Sandeep's mention of the US was a rare expression of a desire to travel to a different area perceived to be even more lucrative than Asia or the Middle East. I will discuss the social limits that determine their migration destinations in greater detail in the next section.

¹⁰² I advised him to find out more about the process, and to not take any serious risks without knowing the specifics.

high aspirations for the future, this quote exemplifies their frustration because of their continued failure to secure even simple white-collar jobs.

As such, the aspirations of young Dadagaun residents have to be contextualized within the socio-cultural and political-economic constraints faced by the villagers. The expectation that meaningful higher education can lead to gainful employment persists to a certain extent, but poor students from rural communities often do not have the resources to pursue such opportunities. The opportunity cost of higher education is particularly high, as the time and effort spent acquiring degrees could be spent earning a living, no matter however meagre. A vicious circle can thereby be perpetuated, where you need higher degrees to get better jobs but by having to perform ‘medium’-level jobs to make ends meet, many students can no longer pursue further education. Even to gain access to these lower jobs, people have to often rely on “source force”, but poor villagers from rural communities generally lack the social capital to get such opportunities. The jobs that are available to them usually do not pay well, leaving these young, often ambitious, people feeling frustrated, undervalued, and disappointed. Many of them then make desperate plans to escape the situation and look to foreign employment.

This trajectory of schooling, higher education, casual employment, and frustrated ambitions is extremely gendered. Of the 15 people from Dadagaun who are currently working abroad, none of them are women. In fact, no woman from Dadagaun has ever gone abroad to work.¹⁰³ Many post-teenage girls remain in school: eight girls between the ages of 20 and 30 are now enrolled in Bachelor’s degree programmes while nine girls have passed the SLC and are working towards a higher secondary (12th grade) degree. However, regardless of their education situation, or even despite it, girls continue to remain central figures as domestic workers in the household.

Nisha Thapa Magar is a 21-year-old student, pursuing a Bachelor’s in Business Studies (BBS). She lives with her parents and two younger brothers, both of whom are currently in high school. On a school day, she wakes up at 3.30 a.m. to fetch water from a nearby tap. Once she stocks up enough water in the house for the day, she performs her daily prayer, drinks some tea and walks about an hour to get to her college. Her classes end at around noon, when she returns home. During the summer months, because of the uphill walk as well as the heat, it can take her up to two hours to get home. Upon her return, she eats her

¹⁰³ A few women have travelled for short trips to bordering India, primarily for pilgrimage. I will explore this gendered trajectory of migration in the next section.

lunch and does the household's dishes. Her father works as a driver, and her mother is usually busy working in the fields.

After lunch, Nisha takes the three goats they own to graze. Every other day, she goes to the forest to gather firewood for the house. When she returns, she cleans the house and washes everyone's clothes. As it gets dark, she lights a fire and prepares the evening meal with her mother. Mother and daughter implore Nisha's brothers to help with the housework on a daily basis, but barely get any support. Sometimes they will help bring water from one of the village taps or irrigate their vegetable garden, but usually their pleas fall on deaf ears. If Nisha's father is home, he usually shouts at them enough to get them to help with chores, but he only gets home from work after 8 p.m. on most days. After dinner, if there are no power outages,¹⁰⁴ Nisha does her homework. Most days, however, she is too tired from the day's work, and no one checks her work at her college in any case, so she usually goes to bed.

Nisha is thus a full-time student, but she is also a full-time worker at home. If you ask Nisha, or any other woman her age, they report themselves as being unemployed even though they do the lion's share of the work, and are the driving force behind the home economy of the village.¹⁰⁵ Meena Acharya and Lynn Bennett (1982) reported on this phenomenon over thirty years ago, when they sought to place the role of women in the subsistence sector in rural Nepal. Based on extensive mixed-methods research in seven villages throughout the country, they found that the average female work burden was 10.81 hours per day, compared to 7.51 for men. Women were found to be working more than men across all groups, and the work burden increased with age. The evidence from Dadagaun clearly demonstrates that Acharya and Bennett's findings remain as relevant today as they did three decades ago, with women continuing to contribute more as workers even as they pursue other opportunities through education.

Nisha is actually also one of the few young women in the village who has been formally employed before. She was employed at a private school an hour's walk from the village. Her father had told her about a local recruiting company that would find employment opportunities for people on a commission basis. She taught Computer and Accounting classes to primary school students, even though she confessed she barely knew how to use a computer herself. The pay was extremely low (less than Rs 3,000 a month) and she was

¹⁰⁴ Nepal Electricity Authority regulates electricity distribution through *loadshedding* to manage the limited power supply in the country.

¹⁰⁵ See next section.

expected to work long hours, often getting home only after dark. She was thus directly involved with perpetuating the education industry by working as a low-paid teacher at a local private school. Her mother also had safety concerns, as she had to walk back through a forest alone at dark, and drug addicts as well as wild animals had often been reported along the way. The opportunity cost of her employment was high, as she was away from home throughout the day, which affected the upkeep of the house. Her employment thus did not meet most requirements of what Dadagaun residents considered a good job, as she had to work long hours, was paid very little money, and faced several hurdles in carrying out her work. As a result, Nisha quit work a few months later, even though she had not secured any other opportunities. She has been looking for another, better job, but to no avail.

Nisha is an inquisitive girl, and would often ask me about the world outside her village. She wanted to know if sports personalities really made millions just by playing or how much 1 rupee would be in the UK or if Nepalis and black people were treated the same way in foreign countries. During these exchanges, when I asked her about her ambitions, she said,

I want to be a social worker, and I want to start a business. (Why?) Social workers take care of old people and children. I will make money through business, as I don't have to work under someone else either. I want to start an ad agency.

Q: What do you have to do for that?

Nisha: I don't know.

Q: How did you think of this?

Nisha: I was watching TV. Some ads are really bad so I want to make something that is better, that works better. It is something for me to think about but I think I would make it better. (12/11/2013)

Even if neither of these goals were in her immediate horizon, her desire to fulfil them was evident in different ways. For instance, when she found out that one of her neighbours was not feeding their elderly mother properly, Nisha secretly arranged for the mother to come to her house for afternoon meals. She then asked me about old age homes in the city, and what she would have to do to place someone there. Despite these small efforts, however, Nisha is circumspect about her future prospects.

I miss my college (classes) a lot because of house work and many other reasons. I used to be top of my class in middle school but these days I am not sure of even passing. There are so many who have lots and lots of education, but even they have not gotten jobs. I don't even know if I will pass BBS [Bachelor's], and since I have not studied a lot, I don't think I will get a job. (12/11/2013)

Nisha's quote shows how even people with high education degrees are not necessarily employed, so the belief in education as a facilitator for employment is diminishing. Nisha is not sure what she will do next with her life. She is glad that pursuing a BBS degree has meant that she has not had any pressure to get married yet.¹⁰⁶ Not unlike young men her age, she would like to be able to go abroad, but is not hopeful of such an outcome either.

Nisha: I want to get a green card to go abroad, but you have to be able to go as well, right? We have no money so how can we go even if we get green card?

Q: Why do you want a green card?

Nisha: Because in Nepal I cannot get any jobs. Maybe you won't get jobs abroad either, but even then you can survive there. Here, there is no system and no support. The government is bad as well.

(long pause)

The main thing is income...economic condition. If we were better off, then we could start our own business, so we can take the right steps. We could take small steps to go up and open something big. So economy is the major issue that holds us back. The village is also backward, and the people discriminate against women. People are not educated so they do not understand things. If you come home even slightly late then they scold you and shout at you as if you have done something wrong, even if you were just working. It is hard for us to move ahead.

Once again, this quote demonstrates an underlying sense among young people that the village is backward. In this instance, the state of the economy as well as a sense of gender discrimination and inequality made Nisha comment that the village was backward. Crucially, she perceived the lack of education as the core of the problem, as many young women in Dadagaun are trapped by their circumstances. Gendered expectations place significant household burdens on them, job opportunities remain scarce, and foreign employment is beyond their reach. Nisha suspects her father would not allow her to go abroad to work even if she got an opportunity, even though he would have no problems sending either of her brothers.

Kripa Adhikari, Dilli's sister, feels just as aggrieved by the gender differences that have held young women back in Dadagaun. She is 22, and is in the second year of her Bachelor's degree programme. She is concerned that her family might marry her off soon: "For Chhetri-Bahun [the so-called high-caste groups] they say we have to get married early, so I worry that I might end up getting married soon, especially if I don't get a job." (18/10/2013).

¹⁰⁶ I will discuss the implications of education for the age of marriage for women in the next chapter.

Her worries extended beyond just getting married, as she was mindful of societal expectations:

The village and society and narrow concept are holding us back. Even if we say we want to do something, they won't let us because we are girls, so we should get married and go home. We have to wash dishes or we won't get to make a living. Dilli himself has studied, but he and father have the same concept. If we say we will live in a room [in the city] and get a job or study, they say no you can't, you will be spoiled. Girls have to live at home, cannot live out much, they say. People will say all sorts of things all the time, and say bad things...

Q: Would Dilli face any problems?

Kripa: He is a boy. He is always pure. It does not matter at all what he does. There is no problem. If Dilli wanted to get a room in Kathmandu, there would be no stopping him at all, but for us [girls] that is not even a possibility. Walking all the way from here [the village] means that it is hard for us to get access, and it is hard for us to learn things.

It is perhaps no surprise that gender expectations continue to determine potential outcomes for young women in Nepal. While more girls now have access to schools, they face glass ceilings and restrictions at all levels. As Rothchild (2006) noted in Jiri, there are clear tensions between education and traditional norms, as the experience of schooling plays a role in raising the aspirations of girls even as societal preferences limit their opportunities. The restricted mobility of girls as compared to boys in both education and employment further hinders their prospects.

Despite the obstacles, Kripa remains hopeful of a positive outcome. She intends to work in a bank, and had even applied to work at Himalayan Bank, the oldest private bank in Nepal. Her father had sold some land to a manager at the bank, and the manager had encouraged her to apply for the job. However, her application was not successful.

I tried many times, but they take only their own people. I knew someone there, but that was a random relationship, a weak relationship, so why would they give it to us? Besides, all the others [applicants], the boys and girls looked so dangerous (*khatarnaak*). I felt like a really small person, and felt we could not get a job.

This quote raises many other issues and anxieties that young Dadagaun women face in their employment pursuits. First, not only are social networks important for securing jobs, but there are different grades and levels of effectiveness within these networks. The access that many of them have to gainful employment in their aspired fields is often weak because of their low social capital, and so they find it difficult to secure these opportunities. Second, given their educational background— where most of them have only attended either Nepali-medium public schools or small local private schools— and geographical marginalization,

they often feel inferior to their private-school-educated and city-dwelling competitors. Even people like Kripa, who appear to be confident about their abilities, thus begin to doubt their employment prospects and feel limited in their capacity to aspire because they lack the social and cultural capital required to navigate this terrain. The obstacles they face are compounded by the fact that they do not have the right networks, they do not have the right qualifications, and they live far away from city hubs. Gainful employment thus remains a distant dream.

IV. Dadagaun Employment: A Synopsis

The general experiences and trends in education and employment outcomes for young people discussed thus far are also affected by the broader political economy that they encounter. Numerous respondents described in formal interviews and informal conversations how they were pessimistic about their expectations for gainful employment because 1) they did not have the necessary degrees and qualifications, 2) they did not know anyone else who was employed because of their education qualifications, and 3) they did not have the right connections and networks to get ‘meaningful’ jobs.

Table 13 Dadagaun employment, a synopsis

	‘Unemployed’		Service Industry		Shopkeeper		Student		Working Abroad		Retired	
Male/Female	22	83	58	12	13	11	7	10	15	0	11	0
Total	105		70		24		17		15		11	
Percentage	43%		29%		10%		7%		6%		5%	

Table 13 provides an overview of the current status of Dadagaun residents over the age of 20. When asked about their employment status through open-ended questions, 43% of Dadagaun villagers responded that they were unemployed. The key to understanding this response is to pay particular attention to the gender dynamics, as an overwhelming majority of women (72% of total women in the village) responded that they were unemployed. However, further questions about how they spent their day as well as daily observations over many months made it clear that most women were not unemployed so much as they were farmers. In addition to doing most of the household chores and domestic work, they were central to the agricultural way of life. When they said that they were unemployed, they were referring to the fact that they did not have *paid* employment. For instance, Pramila Thakuri, a mother of five who belongs to the Chhetri caste, reported that she was unemployed, but follow up responses clearly demonstrated her role within the household economy.

We were too poor growing up, so I had to work in other people's homes to get enough to eat. When it was time to study I was taking care of buffaloes...so who would let me study? Maybe if I had studied even a few years, I could have gotten some small job, even as an office helper. Now I don't have a job...I just work at home, I work in the fields, and I sell firewood...that's it really. What job could I have? (10/30/2012).

Pramila's response demonstrates the difficulties people from the parental generation faced in balancing their transitions between home and work, which affected their schooling choices. Her family does not own a lot of land so they have not sold any, and no one in their family has migrated for work. As a result, they have not benefited from an injection of cash, as has been the case for some families in the village. Her husband worked as a labourer in the past, but is now unemployed because he has been too ill to work for the last three years. The family's economic circumstances have thus not changed significantly since Pramila's youth, but all her children pursued schooling, at least to the secondary level, denoting clearly the generational change in the pursuit of education. Although Pramila provided for her family by working in the fields and selling firewood from neighbouring forests, she felt resigned to her situation, pining instead for a job as a petty office helper. Working as a farmer was thus framed within a narrative of 'the old ways', whereas the fruits of modern education were considered to be emancipatory in comparison. Pramila thus devalued her own work, internalizing her contribution as secondary to those with schooling credentials and formal employment.

Pramila's story is not the exception but the rule for most women in Dadagaun. I introduced Jyoti Tamang in chapter five, and she similarly claimed that she was relegated to carrying out farm work for the rest of her life:

What can we do? Nothing really. Ever since I was born, all I know is how to use *kuto kodalo* [trowel and hoe]. We have no real income, and this is all there is, this village, as you can see. No matter how hard we work, we cannot make any money. I am getting old now, and so I cannot dig or plough the fields as effectively any more either. At least I sent all my kids to school, got them through class 12. That is all I can do. (10/31/2012)

Once again, the close perceived relationship and ultimate tension between education and agricultural work became evident through these reflections. While Jyoti was frustrated with her own trajectory, she expressed great satisfaction at having ensured that her children acquired formal schooling. Her comments on foreign travel further elucidated this point:

I have not travelled the country, or even the city [Kathmandu]...let alone go abroad. I have not studied even a single year in school, and if someone took me to Ratna Park [the central transport hub in Kathmandu], I probably could not find my way home. I

have eyes, legs, feet, but I still cannot travel at all, and need someone else to go with me. For people like me, life is only in the village.

It is clear that Jyoti felt that her horizons were limited to the village, and her access to the modern world represented by the city was beyond her scope because of her lack of education. Paid employment within the formal economy was thus out of the question for her, and many others like her.

As discussed earlier, agricultural work in Dadagaun depends largely on labour-share arrangements and while the specific circumstances vary slightly on a case by case basis, there is no denying that women are entirely responsible for the successful functioning of the *mela*. During the planting season for both rice and maize, for instance, women were unequivocally dominant as farm workers. There was one high-school dropout boy who would regularly participate in *mela* and some of the men who identified as casual labourers joined in on some days when they could not find other employment, but men working the fields were clear exceptions to the norm. The agrarian economy was driven by women, even though they casually waved such work aside as ‘household work’, and considered themselves unemployed. Employment then related to holding a job outside the sphere of their private lives, and required them to receive some form of regular wage or salary. As the examples in this chapter show, they laughed when asked what they did for a living or if they were employed; they felt they did nothing even as they worked extremely long hours.

This is not to say that women never work outside the agricultural sector. Eleven Dadagaun women run shops, eight of them in the village and three in the nearby capital city. Twelve other women work as primary schoolteachers (2), storekeepers (2), tailors (3), receptionists (2), a housekeeper, and cadre of a political party (*karyakarta*). Of the eleven women who are shopkeepers, ten own and run these shops with their husbands, and the only independent shop run by a woman is a small vegetable store in the capital city. The participation of women in the formal economy in the village is also largely mediated by men. Children—boys and girls alike—also actively work as shopkeepers or at least helpers in their parents’ businesses, so they balance their responsibilities with their school commitments.

None of the women reported that they had retired either, but this is to be expected given their propensity to not see their household or agricultural work as employment. More women are pursuing higher education degrees, but they are under increasing pressure to balance these new aspirations while fulfilling the traditional expectations of household work placed on them. Dadagaun women have also failed to move abroad to seek gainful

employment, even as more and more men, from Dadagaun and elsewhere, are increasingly pursuing such opportunities to make ends meet.

An overwhelming majority of Dadagaun men are employed in various low to mid-level positions in the service industry. Besides shopkeepers, the most common profession in Dadagaun is driving, with nine men currently working as drivers. There is some variation within these professions: a couple of drivers with some academic credentials and the right networks are employed by international agencies like the UN and the US embassy, as I discuss below. These positions are more lucrative, as drivers can earn up to Rs 25,000 a month. However, many others drive public transportation vehicles or school vans and they make less than Rs 8,000 a month. Despite this variation, the profession itself is summarily dismissed as a low job. Sandeep vocalized this sentiment well during an informal conversation:

It is not a good job. The money is not that good, but even if it were good, still you are just a driver, which is a low job. There is no prestige, no status, and nobody respects you. Rs 20,000 or Rs 40,000 is not a lot of money, but even if it were, driver is useless. I mean, do you know of anyone who says I want to be a driver? Does anyone dream of being a driver? (14/08/2013)

This comment further illustrates the traits that are considered important for a job to be considered good. While income is certainly important, it is not the only or necessarily even the defining feature in terms of people's aspirations from employment. Young people expect to use their educational background to get a job that will grant them a certain position in society, and jobs within the service industry are not seen as suitable professions regardless of the income they generate.

Nonetheless, a lot of Dadagaun families rely on driving to make ends meet, and networks play a significant role in ensuring that close friends and relatives get employed. Six of the nine drivers from Dadagaun are related to each other. Paras Thapa Magar was the first villager to get a driving job about three decades ago. He was also the most educated adult in Dadagaun at the time. He had passed his School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam, and a *sahu* had been impressed enough to recommend him for a job as a driver. His academic credentials qualified him for a better job even within the driving profession, and his experience has since exposed him to a network of driving opportunities, which allowed him to rise through the ranks as well as inform his cousins and relatives whenever job openings arose in the field. Consequently, Paras is now a driver for an international mission in Nepal, and has been the chief architect in getting his siblings, kin, and friends into the profession.

The pervasiveness of familial as well as social networks extends to employment opportunities in other sectors. Twelve Dadagaun villagers work in the food industry, either as cooks or waiters. Each person got employed because they knew someone, usually the owner of a restaurant, in the capital city. These relationships did not have to be too strong because the work was assumed to be unskilled or low-skilled, and people were expected to learn on the job. Indeed, the Nepali saying *goru becheko sahino* (a weak relationship)¹⁰⁷ rang true because the most common facilitators for such employment were *sahus*, neighbours, and even distant acquaintances from the city. Such networks put people on a path of promotion based on apprenticeship, as they hoped to get better jobs through their experience.

Bijay Khadka, 45, started his food career as a servant and then a dishwasher. His family was extremely poor and their only source of income growing up was selling firewood they collected from the nearby forest. His father died before he was ten years old (he does not remember when exactly), and he never had the opportunity to study as a child. He alleges that his uncle, who raised him for a few years, and his family did not want to educate Bijay because he would become knowledgeable and make claims to the family property. While Bijay's first cousins went to primary school, he was forced to take care of livestock and complete household chores.

One of Bijay's distant relatives took pity on him and recommended him to work as a servant for a politician ("he later became Minister", Bijay reported proudly), when he was a teenager. After working diligently for two years, serving the Minister in every way, he was rewarded by an offer to take up any position he wanted. Bijay had enjoyed cooking at the house, so he asked to be placed as a cook somewhere. The politician apparently used his connections to get Bijay employed at Soaltee hotel, one of the premium hotels in Kathmandu. The manager agreed to hire Bijay without even interviewing him. When Bijay reported for work, however, the manager asked him how many years of schooling he had completed. Bijay did not want to lie so he said he had never been to school, which prompted the manager to rescind his offer. "If only you had gone to school for 4-5 years, even if you had not passed, I would have taken you. If you cannot even read or write your name, we cannot take you in a five star hotel." This view demonstrates that education, and in particular literacy, can be a social good, as it equips people with some basic skills. At the same time, education also serves as a positional good, because it allows for differentiation between those who have or do not have these academic credentials. A few decades ago, even basic literacy through a few

¹⁰⁷ The literal translation of the saying is thus: the relationship forged between strangers based on one person selling an ox to another.

years of schooling would have been enough for people to differentiate themselves and get better paying jobs. Bijay was thus denied a crucial employment opportunity thirty years ago because of his lack of schooling, which he asserts is the main reason why he will ensure his children now go to school. Once again, the experience of the parental generation directly influences their decision to ensure that their children pursue education.

Nonetheless, Bijay had met some people because of his work with the politician, and a low-level officer introduced him to a restaurant owner. Bijay worked for three years as a dishwasher, his pay being his shelter and his food. As he became familiar with the cooking environment, he got promoted to a cook helper, and then finally became a cook at a local hotel in a touristy part of Kathmandu for over fifteen years. Although his pay was not high (a few thousand rupees, as he put it), he was proud of the fact that he rose through the ranks to become a cook, where he learned to make numerous national and international dishes. There are numerous other people whose stories echo Bijay's story, as small boys with no schooling somehow made their way as dishwashers into the cities and learned various skills to become waiters and cooks over time. They have then used their familiarity and networks to find jobs for their friends and relatives.

The most significant change in employment opportunities for Dadagaun residents is the rise of seasonal out-migration for foreign employment. Although three people from the grandparent generation (now aged over 45) had gone abroad to work in India (either in the army or the food industry), most villagers had not left the country until the turn of the millennium. The first men to go abroad paid between Rs 40,000 to Rs 200,000 to manpower agencies and their brokers to get placements. While these agencies continue to be prominent in the region, some men have been able to go abroad for employment, cutting out the brokers, through the connections and opportunities that early Dadagaun migrants have communicated back to the village. Irrespective of how they get there, most men work as cooks, waiters, drivers, security guards, or labourers in these countries.

The impact of foreign employment can be felt not only because of the numbers involved but also the flow of remittances and ideas into the village. The most visible marker of change through foreign employment is the construction of cement houses in the village. It is not difficult to guess which households have sent family members abroad simply by walking through the village. Most men have either sent back money or returned with funds themselves to upgrade their traditional thatched-roof mud-and-stone houses with 'modern'

terraced houses. The changes are not only cosmetic, as these migration experiences also affect education and employment opportunities as well as future aspirations.

Figure 13 New construction in Dadagaun



(A multi-storey house being built with remittance money, with some other similar houses interspersed with the rest of the village in the background.)

Amit Shrestha was one of the first people from Dadagaun to go abroad for employment. He is 36 years old, and has been working in Dubai for the past decade. He was among the first batch of students to attend Bhumi, and he attended school for about six years before dropping out. Consistent with most others of his age at the time, the pressure to work and earn a living was too great, so he quit school to get a job. He went to Kathmandu to work as a cook helper, and worked in various hotels in tourist hotspots around Thamel and Godavari for about five years. His main responsibility was to help the cook with chopping, cutting, and washing, but he also did some cooking and learned the basics. He was not making enough money, but was glad that he was learning this work. This skill soon became useful in his pursuit of further employment.

I had worked for about five years, but I was not happy any more. I don't know why but when the king died [i.e. in the royal massacre of 2001] I felt very sad and I decided to stop working. I left my job and waited around for a few months but then I was getting restless. I wanted to go abroad to earn some money. We did not make enough here, but there was more potential to make a living abroad, so I went there. (09/06/2012)

Amit relied on a manpower agency to first travel to Dubai in United Arab Emirates (UAE). He paid an agent Rs 35,000 at the time, but he claims that the price has gone up to over Rs 100,000 to work in the hotel line. He had met the agent while he had been working in Kathmandu, and Amit claims their pre-existing relationship sped up the process. He gave the agency all his relevant documents for employment, including work experience in hotels, certificates, and passport. There was no real interview at the time; his papers were sent abroad and then he received a job offer. He had presented a fake certificate to show that he had passed 8th grade, but it was not necessary as no one cared about his education.

He works as a cook at a restaurant cooking Chinese, Continental, and Indian dishes. The hotel employs about 42 people, including about 12 Nepalis. He enjoys his work, and is happy in Dubai. Although he had worked in the hotel line for a few years, he did not really know as much about cooking until he went there. He learned many things at his workplace, and he now finds the work easy. He can work up to fifteen hours a day, earning him overtime pay for any work exceeding eight hours. His company provides him with food and shelter, and there are no restrictions to his time beyond work hours. Although he misses his family and wishes he could take them with him, he claims that he has gotten used to the separation now. He returns home almost every year, and is happy with his earnings so far, so he believes the sacrifice is worth it. The company provides paid holiday for up to 60 days a year, and even pays for his return ticket to Nepal, so he is content with the arrangement.

Amit experiences some obvious benefits to his employment abroad. First, he finds a sense of dignity to his work that is not recognized in Nepal.

Being a cook is not a status position. Nobody treats a cook well here. But in Dubai even being a dishwasher is a good thing. There was an old Indian man who had been washing dishes since the restaurant opened three decades ago. He wanted to do nothing else and was happy with all the money he was making. He did not even get scolded for anything. Cooks can get scolded even more, because you have to get everything right...salt right, cooking right, amount of water right. But if you do your job well then no one can say anything to you, and they respect you if you do it right.

This issue of status through employment helps contextualize foreign migration not only in economic but also social terms. While in Nepal, being a cook would mean that Amit would be labelled as a low-level worker in the service industry, he does not face a similar sense of inferiority when he performs the same job abroad.

Second, the job has allowed Amit to make a good living for himself and his family. He used to struggle to make ends meet at home, but the strength of the foreign currency has translated into material wealth in Nepal for him. As most of his expenses are paid for in

Dubai, he is able to make a sizeable saving each year. With his earnings, he has built a three-storey cement house, and has rented one of the rooms as a shop to a fellow villager. The house is tall and sits atop a hill in the outskirts of the capital city, so it serves as an ideal spot for a leading Internet Service Provider (ISP) in the region to place their internet tower. As part of the deal, Amit's family now get free access to high-speed internet and they also receive a monthly fee of Rs 5000 for hosting the tower. Amit's main expense in Dubai had been his daily telephone calls to his wife in Nepal, but the free internet at his home has meant that he can now talk to his family for free. As a result, he expects his savings to increase even more in the future.

In financial terms, Amit is doing very well, even in comparison to Tilak Thapa, his batch-mate who consistently came first in class examinations at Bhumi. However, Amit regularly brought up the achievements of Tilak during our conversations. Tilak is now the Academic Coordinator at Bhumi, and Amit expressed a desire to have achieved something similar if he had pursued higher education like Tilak.

Before, if you had only studied till 7th or 8th grade, you could become a teacher. Now you have to study a lot; even SLC is not enough. Tilak always came first or second, first or second, and I used to come third or fourth. (Laughs heartily) In later years though, I could not compete any more and I did not want to study either. I had to start earning money, and even though I struggled before, I can provide for my family now. But Tilak has studied a lot, he is my friend, and everyone in the village respects him. I could not study and I could not be like Tilak.

The story that emerges is thus complicated because money is not the only consideration, as Amit and other villagers respect Tilak for his contribution to the school and the community. Migration is increasingly becoming a more attractive opportunity for Dadagaun villagers, but this does not immediately undermine the position of those who choose to contribute within their own communities. At the same time, the value that Amit placed on education was not just relative to others, as he felt his lack of education affected his own life choices.

I only studied till 7th grade, not a whole lot really. I learned a few things, but 7th grade education with barely any English at all. It is not really that important, that much study. I even tried to give SLC from private [as an independent student], but you needed 8th grade certificate, which I didn't have. From the people who studied with me, from this village, no one has given SLC.¹⁰⁸ They studied till 5 to 8, but that's it. We did not study in our times.

Of course it makes a difference. If I had finished SLC and spoke English, I could have gotten a job in Kathmandu and made Rs 10,000 to Rs 15,000. But weak English

¹⁰⁸ Although Tilak was his classmate, he was from a different, neighbouring village.

meant that I could not get anything here. A *sahu* had taken me to an Embassy to get me a nice, easy job...just throwing balls back to children of Ambassadors and other foreigners when they play. But I did not have any education degree so I did not get the job, and I just had to work as cook helper.

Amit thus believes that his lack of education, which he ties directly to his poor command over English, restricted his ability to secure a job that would provide him a good income and social status in his community. Being educated for him also meant doing a job that was well paid without being taxing. Without the right education, he felt compelled to move abroad to make ends meet. Even when the employment he sought was not explicitly related to education, his inability to complete school disadvantaged him in the job market. He felt he was held back by these shortcomings even when he was abroad:

If I knew English and had a higher certificate, even in Dubai I could move up to a 7 star hotel, made of glass, in the middle of an island, with helicopters at the top itself. I tried out twice for it because I had a friend who worked there but I did not get it both times. They would interview me and ask questions. My friend had told me I should say my fathers and forefathers had all worked in kitchen line and we were all cooks. He said it would increase my chance. (laughs) I said that, and I understood some questions, but other things that I did not even understand. How could I understand? Even 10+2 students and graduates don't know how to answer to *khaires* [foreigners]. My friend had taught me so I told him that all my forefathers had all been cooks, so they were happy with that, but that was not enough.

This quote demonstrates the expectation that education brings people knowledge or awareness to navigate different situations, including dealing with foreigners, which could provide a sense of status in the community. Amit did not have the right credentials so he was not selected for the position, but these experiences have shaped his aspirations for his children. He sends both his sons to local private schools now, explicitly in the hope that they will be able to learn English better. His younger son, who is currently in 4th grade, wants to attend Bhumi instead, and Amit acknowledges that the school has been competing with local private schools. However, he does not want his younger son to later complain that his older sibling was sent to private school while he attended a free, public school.

Amit has experienced setbacks because of his limited education, but he is not convinced that higher education is the answer to his family's future.

...We are not that kind of people who will be really big. Their [his son's] education is not that great. They are not 1st or 2nd...they are not even 4th or 5th in their class, so they are not that great. My wish is that they go to school till 10th grade, go to campus, then give them training, and send them to work abroad.

Amit demonstrates awareness of education as a positional good. He believes that the value to his children's education also derives from how they perform in relation to others in school. If they were at the top of the class, perhaps it would make sense to continue their education, but given their relatively low position in their year, he feels that schooling is not enough for them. However, Amit wants to make sure that his children continue with their education to a certain point for the purposes of credentialing, as getting academic degrees would help them get employed abroad. At the same time, he also wants his children to gain practical skills through training so that they can be easily employed. Further, he is wary of his children getting too much education.

There is no point studying. It won't get them jobs and they will just end up playing cards. All the ones that have the most education in this village, they don't even want to go abroad to work. They think the work abroad is beneath them. They cannot get any job here either, so they spend all day playing cards and doing nothing. I don't want my son to be like that, so I won't send him to school after 10th or 12th grade. It is better to work and earn a living.

Amit thus pointed to the perception among young people in the village that education elevated people above manual work. Whereas in past generations, numerous people recounted that they worked in the fields, in recent years those who went to school no longer want to work as farmers in the village. Dilli captured this sentiment thus:

Dai, I have spent twelve years of my life going to school. It was not easy to attend school but I went all the time, and I passed my exams. Now, after completing 12 class, I am trying to study more, even though I am not doing well. But how can I go back and just work in the fields in the village? I definitely have to try and find a proper job in the city, or I can go abroad. But if I just work in the village and work on my land, then what was the meaning of going to school for all those years? (11/10/2012)

This quote shows clearly how education was seen as a tool to escape village work, and even when students were unable to secure meaningful employment, they held on to this notion that they were nonetheless superior because of their education background. Education's link to modernity depended on its ability to delink village students from their immediate surroundings. Amit was concerned that his children might demonstrate a similar attitude after their education experience. While there was value to the pursuit of education, then, Amit appeared to put a limit to its extent. Amit missed out on some opportunities because of various educational constraints, but he was also circumspect about the opportunities that could be available to his children, even if they pursued further education.¹⁰⁹

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Given the political economy of the region and current experiences of other young villagers enrolled in school, Amit would rather his children went abroad to make money. In fact, Amit wants to live in Dubai to work for another five years or so, by which time his eldest son, now in 8th grade, will graduate from high school. He will then use his contacts to take his son abroad, after which he expects to return to Nepal.

This plan, again, demonstrates the importance of networks for employment, even abroad. Amit has already facilitated the migration of three people from his village to work in Dubai. Although he used an agent, he now knows the process better, and has advised his relatives on the papers they need to apply for work visas. He connected them to friends he knew in Dubai whose work places had job openings. He wants to do the same for his son, but is worried that even those he helped might not be there for him in the future.

I have to stay in Dubai for five more years. I have taken some people with me, but they might not take my son. They will take their own people, so there is no point in relying on others. I have to think about the future from now, and if my son faces difficulties, then that's a problem. Once he gets 12th grade degree, I will take him abroad then I can come back to Nepal and rest.

Once again the strength of networks comes into play here, and even the expectation of reciprocity from those he has helped is not enough to ease Amit's worries. The stakes are very high, and Amit does not want to take any chances with his extended networks. In 2012, when Amit returned to Dubai, he took with him all the paperwork for four more villagers to try and get his company to send them offer letters to migrate to Dubai for work. Three of the four villagers were related to Amit and his wife through close kinship ties, while the fourth was a friend and a neighbour from the village. While he has helped others who could realistically return the favour and help his son migrate for work in the future, Amit does not want to take any chances, and so he plans to stay abroad until he can personally ensure his son takes his place.

Despite the numerous challenges that Dadagaun residents face in their pursuit of gainful employment, Amit's trajectory thus highlights the possibilities that have emerged through migration. Nisha's 18-year-old brother Abhijeet Thapa Magar, Sandeep's 22-year-old neighbour Dipendra Adhikari, and their 24-year-old friend Hikmat Tamang, who are technically still students but frustrated about their employment prospects, thus aspire to go abroad for employment. Migration is providing an alternative pathway for mobility, and more Dadagaun residents are attracted to it as a viable life choice.

Migration, foreign employment, and remittances have come under increasing scrutiny and countless stories of migrant abuse have recently come to light. Tristan Bruslé has

documented how Nepali migrants in labour camps in Qatar face problems such as “non-payment, underpayment or delay in paying salaries, physical harassment, frightful living conditions and health hazards” (2009: 156). The plight of Nepali migrants has received widespread attention recently because of the problems associated with the construction of football stadiums for the FIFA World Cup 2022, to be held in Qatar. Pete Pattison (2014, 2014a, 2013), a video and photo journalist for the Guardian, has documented in harrowing detail the plight of Nepali construction workers, whose work and living conditions are said to amount to modern-day slavery. The suffering of Nepali migrants abroad is not limited to Qatar, however, as allegedly on average, each day, two dead Nepalis return in coffins from lucrative destinations for economic migrants (Adhikari 2010).¹¹⁰ These reports demonstrate simultaneously the often-fatal dangers of migration as well as the chronic desperation that causes over 1400 Nepalis to still leave the country on a daily basis.

Despite these sobering national trends, Dadagaun residents have been fortunate that they have not faced such dire conditions in their quest for foreign employment in recent years. I suspect that the village’s proximity to the capital city has allowed residents to find out more about their options for migration from the numerous manpower agencies that facilitate these opportunities. Further, a growing network of migrants from the village has contributed to these positive outcomes, as current migrants provide aspirant migrants with knowledge about the specific circumstances in destination countries as well as job conditions abroad. Increasingly, Dadagaun residents are going abroad not by paying agents but by using their established links from relatives and other villagers, so these networks provide some protection to new migrants.

This is not to suggest that all migration from the village has led to positive outcomes for the migrants. Abhinav Tamang first went abroad, to Qatar, in 2006. He was only 19 then, but had quit school a few years before. His father was unemployed so he had to earn a living and contribute towards the family’s income. He held numerous small jobs working at a petrol pump as well as driving a taxi before he paid a manpower agency to go to Qatar to work in a bakery. He was quite happy with his work and was making a good salary until he fell ill and had to return to Nepal 16 months later.

I got used to the job. It was like Nepal, go to duty, eat, then go to work, that’s it. All of a sudden I got ill and did not know what to do, so I left. The company told me to take a holiday and then come back. I came back to Nepal and then went back again for three months but things went badly. The company said take another holiday but I felt it was not good for me so I decided to stay in Nepal. The money was good but

¹¹⁰ For similar coverage, see Dougnac 2014, Kaphle 2014, and Amnesty International 2011.

money is not everything. Family matters too. When I was home I did not feel ill or anything. (30/10/2012)

Abhinav spent some time recovering in a hospital in Nepal, but he suspects that he got depressed in Qatar. Dadagaun villagers whispered to me that he went mad (mental) when he was abroad. Abhinav reported that he felt very homesick, but he feels he has recovered now and wants to go back to the Middle East. He has been in Nepal for a few years but has not been able to find any jobs. He says he is confident that he will be able to handle the pressure of being abroad this time. Although his first trip was not a success story, his quote actually demonstrates that his employers had been quite accommodating and tried to support him, which helps him further in making this decision. The lack of opportunities at home leaves him with very little choice, and despite the difficulties he has faced, he is keen to return.

There appears to be a general consensus that going abroad for work is not entirely easy, and yet more and more people are eager to migrate for employment. This is both a reflection of a weak labour market in Nepal which excludes most Dadagaun residents from good jobs and the emergence of a strong migratory network that allows them to pursue relatively lucrative jobs outside the country. Rupesh Tamang, a 22-year-old cook at a local hotel in Kathmandu, shared his aspirations to go abroad “as soon as possible, perhaps within a month or two” despite being aware of the difficulties that lie ahead:

Everyone says it will be painful but I want to go see for myself. I want to learn something there, maybe in hotel line. I don't have a lot of education so I won't get hi-fi job but maybe I will go to Dubai through a manpower agency. There is just no point staying here, even though I have worked in many places. (31/10/2012)

The desire to go abroad is thus linked closely to the lack of opportunities and the frustration that people feel with their employment at home. There is a hierarchy of employment even through migration, not unlike the distinction between a job and a good job even in the village. However, being able to go abroad is closely tied to a sense of upward mobility. As Rupesh said,

In some ways, it is kind of like a promotion. I kind of wanted to move upward. I have to think about prestige and status too. Work alone is not enough. I have to earn a name (for myself) and respect too. I have to go abroad for some time as being a cook is not enough here. Then I can learn and come back here and do things, but what I have now is not enough.

There is thus an acknowledgment that foreign employment is not the absolute answer, but Dadagaun residents nonetheless place high hopes on the possibility of migration for upward socio-economic mobility. They are unhappy with their current employment and hope

that things will change if they leave the country. At the very least, they are willing to give up their immediate circumstances in and around the village to venture away and find out for themselves what the unforeseen world can do for them. As the numerous examples of young people in Dadagaun show, they feel hopeless about their prospects in Nepal. Like numerous migrants the world over, the alternative of foreign employment, regardless of the dangers, seems like the only attractive option open to them.

V. The Trajectory

The evidence from Dadagaun provides a comprehensive picture of the current employment trajectory in the region. The analysis of employment aspirations and expectations of the three groups (recent SLC graduates, Dadagaun youth, and the general Dadagaun populace) demonstrates the wide variability even within each group.

a. Aspirations, Expectations, and Transitions

The life-stages model (Lloyd 2005) expects a linear path of education for children that would lead to employment for educated youth, but the reality is far more complicated. Despite being faced with similar institutional opportunities such as schools and teachers as well as constraints such as poverty and geographical marginalisation, individuals within each group encounter particular circumstances that shape their outcomes. Muna feels emboldened to dream big because of the support she received from a caring family and her Distinction reaffirmed her desire to perform better. Rushna missed out on a Distinction and has had to grow up without a father figure, but these adversities have strengthened her resolve. Rajesh, however, worked hard to achieve a Distinction in his SLC but is pessimistic about his future prospects because of the problems he encounters at home as well as the lack of employment opportunities for other 'educated' people in the village. The unequal implications of gender are also obvious within these groups, as men and women face very different opportunities and constraints that influence their aspirations as well as their outcomes.

These outcomes for each group also demonstrate the different circumstances they experience and how they shape their aspirations and outcomes. On the whole, recent Bhumi graduates who have performed well in the SLC feel empowered and remain hopeful of a meaningful white-collar career through their education pursuits. They recognise the numerous constraints they face, but their success despite these constraints thus far has emboldened them to imagine a different future for themselves. The youth of Dadagaun might have held similar aspirations, but their experience with higher education and employment pursuits has left them feeling jaded. They are frustrated with the lack of opportunities

available to them, as their transition to adulthood has not been as straightforward as they might have expected during their schooling years. Young women are particularly frustrated with the expectation to fulfil familial household obligations while struggling to establish careers for themselves. These outcomes are exaggerated for the general Dadagaun populace at large, as most of them remain dependent on the service industry, particularly as low-level workers, to make ends meet. The willingness and ability to migrate to foreign countries for employment is proving to be an important opportunity, with serious socio-economic implications for those who are able to migrate.

The sense of resigned frustration is finding some outlet through the export of labour to the Middle East, although this option remains exclusively reserved for men. These relatively positive outcomes for those who have migrated now embody a new possibility for the frustrated youth in the village, as they seek meaningful employment opportunities abroad to meet their aspirations. How the recently successful Bhumi graduates fare in their employment pursuits in their youth could further affect the aspirations and expectations of current Bhumi students.

b. Employment of last resort

A number of people in Dadagaun identify themselves as unemployed, but many of those who are employed remain in their current jobs because they feel that they have no other alternative. Most people are extremely unhappy with their circumstances, particularly due to the arduous nature of the work and their extremely low earnings. There are very few paid job opportunities available in the village. There are nine shops that serve as tea stalls, grocery stores, and late-night drinking stalls. These are the hubs of cash transactions in the village but even shopkeepers are incredibly frustrated because they are unable to collect the money that is owed to them by the villagers. As Radha Tamang lamented to me:

We borrowed Rs 50,000 from the *guthi* to start a tea stall. We got customers because we are on this side of the village (where there are fewer shops). But it is very hard to make money as everyone asks for credit and then no one pays back on time. If you ask them, they just get angry, so it's a serious problem. We have to pay Rs 3200 a month as instalment payment for the loan, but it is very hard to meet that.
(07/07/2012)

After struggling to make ends meet, Radha decided to sell her stock and close the shop after three months. Pranila Khadka corroborated Radha's predicament:

There are so many shops in the village so if we don't give it to them then somebody else will, so we cannot afford to anger our customers. But many of them never pay. As you know, my husband (Bijay) has cooking training from the city, so a few years ago we decided to sell *momo*, *thukpa* and *chowmein* and we did a lot of business. However, people did not pay back their money at all so now we have decided not to sell cooked food. Other people look at us and say they make so much money because they see a lot of people in the shop, but they don't see that we don't actually get any money. (08/14/2012)

This sense of frustration is not limited to shopkeepers. Most women, who are responsible for most of the housework as well as agricultural labour, are similarly unhappy about the long hours they keep and the difficult work they do for very low income. The unemployed youth are anxious about their future even as they spend most days playing cards in the village, to the annoyance of their parents. Even Dadagaun residents who hold "office jobs" or work in the service sector in Kathmandu find their commute difficult, particularly during monsoon seasons. Their pay of a few thousand rupees a month is also unsatisfactory and most Dadagaun villagers aspire to better jobs even as they remain tied to their current occupation for the lack of opportunities. The dominant feeling is that they remain poor and marginalized, and do not have access to jobs that could lift them out of their predicament.

c. Education not enough for employment

Dadagaun residents have placed high hopes on education, and often blame their lack of education for their predicament. As a result, school enrolment for Dadagaun children is close to 100%, and the norm to send children to school has been well-established. However, this apparent faith in the education system is not perceived to have translated into meaningful employment opportunities, to the frustration of the general populace.

This feeling that education degrees are not enough for employment opportunities is most prominent among the youth population in Dadagaun. Most of the adult population lack the educational degrees required to compete for high-level jobs, but they have not relied on their schooling to attain even their current jobs. Paras Thapa Magar was the most educated adult for his generation and yet he had to be content with a driving job, which is not considered very prestigious in the village even in the rare instance when it is lucrative. However, at the same time, academic credentialing can still affect some employment outcomes, as even drivers and cooks could pursue better-paying opportunities if they had some degrees.

The aspirations of the youth have been raised by their education and the (inter)national discourse on the empowering ability of education but their experiences have

not matched up to these expectations. As Sandeep, Dipendra, Nisha, and Kripa, among others, have found out, the direct, indirect, and opportunity costs of higher education are extremely high, and they have been unable to secure gainful employment to compensate for these costs yet. Based on these local realities, while some Bhumi graduates remain hopeful of positive outcomes, many others regularly voice concerns that their education might not lead to meaningful employment opportunities. As a result, parents like Amit now want to send their children to school for limited credentialing, till they acquire high school degrees, before they look elsewhere, particularly abroad, for employment. The perceived importance of education for employment appears to be eroding as a result.

The seeming disconnect between education and employment provides the final critique of the life-stages model. Children go through schooling to acquire skills and knowledge to be employed and assume 'adult' roles in this deterministic, linear model, but the evidence from Dadagaun clearly demonstrates that school engagement does not necessarily translate into positive employment outcomes, and people in Dadagaun understand this clearly. In particular, poor people from rural villages have to contend with specific challenges which undermine their education pursuits and their employment outcomes. For instance, most children in Dadagaun are deeply embedded within the household and informal economies to help make ends meet for their families, whereas many young villagers who have undergone formal schooling are now left frustrated in their quest for gainful employment. The expectation that children go to school to learn skills and knowledge that help them acquire jobs and assume adult responsibilities is challenged by these findings.

d. Social capital central to employment

Regardless of their experience of education, Dadagaun residents consistently attest to the importance of social networks for employment at all levels. One of the main reasons why people of all ages are pessimistic about the potential of education to lead to positive employment outcomes is the continued persistence of personal relations and favours for jobs. The nature of these relationships ranges from family and close relatives to friends and casual connections, but patronage relationships are central to getting employed. Bista (1990) has discussed the pervasive need to know someone to make any kind of progress in Nepali society, and his analysis remains relevant even now. Casual labourers, waiters, cooks, drivers, guards, helpers, teachers, accountants, and receptionists repeatedly confirmed that they got employed because they knew someone at the place where they were eventually hired to work, both at home and abroad. Similarly, all unemployed people rued the fact that they did not

have the right connections or networks to get employed. Social networks provide the main mechanism for obtaining jobs, but these networks seem to operate horizontally, so people are integrated only into networks with other people of a similar status to themselves. The networks are not effective at linking people to others who are of higher status and could offer them better options. The rare exceptions are the links between Dadagaun residents and their *sahus*, as these *sahus* sometimes provide job opportunities for those who have sold them land or served them under some capacity. However, these social networks are extremely weak as they are not based on close kinship ties, so they only yield low-level jobs for villagers, as the examples in this chapter demonstrate.

Sandeep captured the complexity of the situation when he frequently lamented that people like him did not know anyone ‘big’ to get well-paying jobs while he gladly used his own connections and even sought my help to get whatever job he could get. Dadagaun residents were thus frustrated about the system that required social and cultural capital, because their networks continued to prevent them from meeting their aspirations, even as these networks provided some low-level jobs to keep them busy.

Adhikari and Goldey (2010) examined the role of social capital in the sustainability of induced community-based organizations in southern Nepal to argue that social capital can be both positive and negative. In this context, they found that social capital could be used to break rules with impunity and facilitate elite capture of resources. Those with access to social networks can thus maintain their position and serve as gatekeepers to opportunities, whereas those at the margins are left behind. The reach of the social networks available to Dadagaun villagers limits them to low-level jobs, where they remain frustrated.

VI. Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of the employment aspirations, expectations, and experiences of Dadagaun residents. The links between education and employment are neither straightforward nor monolithic. These findings thus demonstrate the complexity of people’s transitions from schooling to employment.

Education outcomes play a key role in shaping people’s aspirations and expectations, including in framing what is considered meaningful employment. Income is an important component of this local perception of a ‘good job’, but other factors such as work hours and social status also affect this computation. Although the older cohort in Dadagaun had expressed high hopes for meaningful employment for their children through education (see chapter five), this chapter shows that employment outcomes are not pre-determined based on

education, and social networks are central to securing jobs. Poor people are found to struggle on both counts.

Education is found to display characteristics of a positional good, as the level and kind of education students receive limit their higher education and employment opportunities. Beyond this, however, these findings raise questions about the relevance of education as the primary factor for obtaining employment. Social capital rather than credentials or skills were found to dictate major outcomes in employment, though some differentiation due to education does exist. Education's role as a socializing institution also becomes evident in the way in which people's education levels define their opportunities and constraints.

The modern education system is considered an important marker of 'progress', leading to the uneducated increasingly devaluing their own roles within the local economy. Agrarian work has become the domain of women and internalized as second-rate work. Meanwhile formal paid work that provides income and status has become increasingly valued. While the aspirant youth, including school graduates, have struggled to position themselves within the local or regional economy, the demand for low and semi-skilled labour within the global economy (particularly in the Middle East) is providing the space to absorb some of this labour force. Social networks continue to mediate opportunities for migration, and the expansion of this network has facilitated a larger safety net for those willing to move abroad for jobs. The role of education as a tool for differentiation even within the global force has meant that schooling is not rejected entirely, but the pursuit of education has become more instrumental in certain contexts. The younger generation does not see education as the only means to meeting their aspirations for meaningful employment, and the linear expectation that children go to school to acquire skills and knowledge which allow them to acquire meaningful jobs and assume adult roles does not hold true. The nuance and complexity with which education and employment aspirations, expectations, and outcomes interact and shape each other demonstrate clearly that people's transitions are neither linear nor teleological but contextual and multi-dimensional.

9. Benefits and Implications of Education Engagement

I. Introduction

The analysis on the pursuit of education and the transition to higher education and employment has demonstrated the myriad constraints that significantly limit potential outcomes for the youth of Dadagaun. However, these findings have to be contextualized to also highlight the gains that have been made in recent years. The benefits of formal schooling, alluded to in previous chapters but discussed in particular detail in this chapter, demonstrate the value of education not just as a positional good but also as a social good, and help explain why people from marginal communities continue to aspire for upward mobility through education, even as education and subsequent employment outcomes have not been as favourable as anticipated.

I focus first on some of the opportunities and positive outcomes that have emerged as a result of the engagement with mass schooling and pursuit of gainful employment (section two). I then present a snapshot of the life history of Ritesh Tamang to demonstrate the complexities of people's experiences in their quest for upward mobility (section three). Taken together, these opportunities and constraints represent their life trajectories in both their triumphs and tribulations, helping to highlight the multiple, complex pathways for mobility.

II. Silver Lining

a. Literacy

Although serious concerns remain in terms of the nature, quality, and outcomes of education available to poor and marginalized students, particularly in rural communities (Levinson et al. 1996; Graner 1998, 2006; Bhatta 2004, 2005), there is no denying that Nepal has made giant leaps in ensuring higher literacy for all. With the spread of mass schooling over the last few decades, the literacy rate has seen tremendous improvements.

Table 14 Literacy rate over time in Nepal

Literacy Rate (%)	1991	2001	2011
National	25.0	54.1	65.9
Male	39.6	65.5	75.1
Female	54.5	42.8	57.4

Source: CBS 2012a

There are some concerns about the validity of these figures. First, the literacy rate continues to be computed on the basis of self-reporting without any measures to verify the validity of their claims. Second, the numbers collected do not always tell the same story. For instance, according to the comparative summary provided by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 2012, the overall literacy rate in 1991 was reported to be 25%, but when disaggregated by sex, the male and female literacy rates were reported to be about 40% and 55% respectively.¹¹¹ While mindful of these limitations, it is clear that the literacy rate in Nepal has increased tremendously to 66% in 2011 (CBS 2012).¹¹²

The potential of literacy to enrich people's lives has been widely theorized and reported (Ahearn 2004, Drèze and Sen 2002, Levine et al. 2001, Sen 1999, WCEFA 1990). As discussed in chapter three, Laura Ahearn (2004) has shown how literacy has allowed young men and women in western Nepal to exchange love letters to form new social relationships and engage with notions of development, economic success, nationalism, and individual rights. Levine, Levine and Schnell (2001) argue that the literacy and language skills that women acquire in schools provide them an educational pathway to better health care. Many young people, particularly from rural and marginalized communities, have expressed extreme dissatisfaction with their education pursuits and subsequent outcomes throughout the world (see Jeffrey 2010 for northern India and Katz 2004 for Sudan). Peggy Froerer (2011) has documented how even in communities that no longer see much value in the pursuit of secondary schooling, primary schooling is still pursued because of the value placed on literacy as a life skill. As Anna Robinson-Pant (2000) has noted, there are multiple literacies that facilitate not only existing practices like religious readings but also new everyday experiences like filling forms, minutes, and keeping account. Literacy classes also provide a notion of becoming an educated person, and the value of this feeling extends beyond the mere functionality of education (ibid.).

Recent trends in mass schooling in Dadagaun confirm that literacy rates are rapidly on the rise, reaching almost 100% for those between the ages of 5 and 20. All school-age children in Dadagaun attend school and are able to read and write. Only 9 out of 77 people between 20 to 30 years in the village had acquired less than five years of schooling. This

¹¹¹ It is likely that the three figures have been shuffled around, so the national literacy rate could be about 40%, while male and female literacy could be 55 and 25 respectively. However, this is only reasoned speculation, but the literacy rates listed in Table 14 have still been widely replicated, including in official government documents.

¹¹² There has been a slight procedural change in computing literacy rates: until 2001, children above the age of 6 were considered to compute literacy rates whereas in 2011, children above 5 were considered for the same.

norm of school attendance is becoming even more embedded for children under the age of 16.

The gains in literacy are not limited to school-age children but also parts of the adult population. Uma's work on adult literacy in the village, which I described in chapter five, has meant that about 25 women are now able to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. The skills gained have had both explicit and implicit outcomes, ranging from shopkeepers being able to keep stock of their goods to villagers being able to read daily newspapers to keeping abreast with current events. For instance, Sneha Tamang is a grateful beneficiary of Uma's adult literacy classes. She is a shopkeeper (along with her husband) in the village, and is happy to be able to use her recently acquired skills in her everyday life:

I could not go anywhere to get a job because I did not study before. I would just cut grass and raise goats. Without studying we have no confidence to do anything at all. But I did go to adult literacy classes. I had to raise small children while the classes were offered, so I could not attend regularly. If I could have gone regularly for six months, I would have learned a lot of things. But still, I can do small calculations so I don't have to rely on anyone else at the shop. The big thing is that I can write my own name now so I don't have to use *lyapche* (inked fingerprints) to sign official documents. For small people like us, even that is a big thing. (10/18/2012)

Sneha's case illustrates both the challenges that people face in their efforts to become literate while balancing other familial responsibilities and also the benefits they have accrued from their literacy. In addition to helping her with basic calculations in her shop, the 'simple' act of being able to write her own name has had a transformative effect on Sneha (and many others like her) in Dadagaun.

That said, her husband, who has a few years of schooling, was somewhat dismissive of her skills, as some of his comments demonstrated. For instance, when Sneha was taking a long time to calculate the debt one of their pensioner customers had accrued over the last month, her husband remarked. "Give that to me. This calculation (*hisaab*) is complicated, and just because you have taken some adult literacy classes does not mean you can figure it all out" (17/08/2012). This attitude demonstrated the differentiation in terms of a hierarchy of literacy, whereby school-acquired literacy was valued more than informal literacy courses.

While adult literacy might not be perceived to have the same value as formal schooling, it is still clear that these alternatives are providing women who missed out on schooling for various reasons to acquire some literacy skills that facilitate their everyday lives. The success of adult literacy programmes does raise questions about the suitability of

formal schooling as a tool to increase literacy. It appears that sending children to school for up to ten years to be literate is not an efficient use of time and resources, especially when short, targeted literacy programmes can achieve similar results. At the same time, improving literacy is not the only motive of schooling, and even if the outcomes of formal schooling have not been as impressive as expected, there are some clear gains.

The emergence of a new generation equipped with literacy could have important long-term implications. It is well established that educated parents can provide crucial support to their children (see, for instance, Lloyd 2005), so in Dadagaun the next generation of school-age children can be expected to benefit from a literate parent generation. While the immediate outcomes of education pursuits might be disappointing for Dadagaun residents, how current gains in literacy will influence future generations remains to be seen. It is clear though that mass schooling is rapidly creating a more literate populace throughout the country, including in rural areas.

b. Age of marriage for women

As mass schooling has taken hold in Dadagaun, girls have been able to pursue schooling at par with boys in recent years, with most classes in Bhumi roughly equally distributed by gender and all children of school going age attending school on a regular basis. Levine et al. (2001) have argued that schools serve as sites for girls to acquire aspirations, identities, skills, and models of learning that eventually affect their decisions regarding reproduction, child-rearing, and health behaviours. The schooling experience can be closely linked to gaining social and cultural capital that could facilitate upward social mobility for women in their communities.

The evidence emerging from Nepal points to a complicated relationship between education and gender. Despite some gains, as discussed above, Ahearn (2004) notes that increased literacy has also reinforced certain gender ideologies and undercut some avenues to social power for women. Jennifer Rothchild (2006) has argued that schools are not neutral venues but value-laden institutions that reflect many of society's biases at large. Peggy Froerer (2012) has shown that the relationship between education and marriage for girls was complex in the context she explored, because girls with 'too much' schooling could hinder rather than facilitate preferable marriage outcomes, but when girls were able to remain enrolled in school, they did not face the same pressures to get married immediately. Staying in school could often be a conscious choice to postpone marriage for young girls.

In Nepal, the median age at first marriage among women age 25-49 is 17.5 years, while the corresponding age among men is 21.6 years (MOHP et al.: 65). In the South Asian context where underage marriage, especially for girls from rural areas, has been a major ongoing problem, the spread of mass schooling has provided alternatives to early marriage. Lloyd (2005: 480) has found a similar pattern globally, with girls with more years of schooling less likely to marry early. There is a clear trend in Nepal as well, where the age of marriage for both women and men is increasing.

In Dadagaun, as I show in chapter five, far more girls than boys between 20 and 30 years had stopped going to school beyond primary schooling. There were more boys than girls enrolled at each subsequent level of schooling. Of the eleven students who appeared for the SLC in 2010, the top three positions were secured by girls. These girls did relatively well and comfortably completed their higher secondary schooling. While two of the girls have gone on to pursue a Bachelor's degree, one of them got married and is not pursuing further education. Of the seven girls in that school year, the only girls who were not married were the ones continuing with their education.

This outcome is not accidental, as more and more girls are choosing to stay in school consciously to postpone marriage. Manisha Tamang, who scored the highest mark in the SLC in 2010 at Bhumi, confided that she had no intention of getting married right away. She wanted to continue her studies and hoped to either "start a business or work in an office" but she felt that being a Bachelor's student eased the pressure of having to get married immediately. She did most of the house work and helped her father operate their small scale grinding mill in their backyard, but she never missed school and was determined to make something of her education. Manisha acknowledged that it was not impossible to continue her schooling even if she were to get married, but she felt that she did not want to rush into it now.

This propensity to delay marriage among the young generation is significantly different from the past. I outlined Jyoti Tamang's story in chapter five, as she had been married when she was only 14. Similarly, Anita Thapa Magar got married when she was 16:

Since I was not going to study, I was only wasting my time playing and doing household things. One of my cousins got married, so I also got married around then. I did not go to school, so it was not like we were doing anything else that mattered. It was not a big deal for us to get married even when we were so young. (11/12/2012)

Anita thus related her childhood as having been wasted, making particular reference to the fact that she did not attend school. Her marriage at a young age thus had a sense of inevitability for her. However, her aspirations for her children, including her 21-year-old daughter, are completely different:

In the future, I hope our children will study and become someone and show us [their worth]...that's our hope. Even our daughter, instead of sending her to other person's house, we want her to study and do well. We don't want her to have to hear other people's scolding...we want her to become a respectable person. She is still studying, and we don't know if something good will happen but we hope she will get a good job after she finishes her studies.

Anita's case demonstrates once again the centrality of education as a marker of childhood and youth in the village, as there was a clear expectation that her children would continue their schooling. Despite having been married at 16, Anita did not even consider marrying her daughter even when she had turned 21.

Nisha is grateful that she does not have the pressure to get married, as she is pursuing a Bachelor's degree:

Before, girls had to get married as soon as they turned 16-17. There are rules and laws but nobody would follow in the village. My mother got married when she was basically a child. Our society is dominated by men, and women still face many difficulties. Even now I have to do a lot of work at home and my brothers do not help me unless dad scolds them. But no one is telling me to get married. Maybe if I did not go to college and was sitting idle at home there would be more pressure, but these days at least we are not forced to get married. (07/08/2013)

It appears then that most young women do not want to get married early, and education is empowering them through the option to continue schooling to postpone their marriage. Even when there is a resigned fear that their education will not lead to gainful employment, they are nonetheless grateful that they can delay their marriage.

c. Emergence of networks

The experience of mass schooling and the subsequent expectation of employment based on education are new for Dadagaun villagers. The overwhelming verdict has been that many successful Bhumi graduates nonetheless find themselves marginalized in the new spaces in the city, and often fail to realize their immediate aspirations for success. Even when some of them persevere through higher education, most villagers consistently report that social networks dictate employment outcomes, and their low reach means that they fall back to fulfil traditional 'blue collar' roles such as cooks, guards, and drivers.

While these experiences have left a vast majority of the current generation feeling extremely frustrated, it is clear that new avenues have emerged as unexpected outcomes of their engagement. As more Bhumi students complete their SLC and pursue higher education, for instance, they are more aware of the opportunities available to them. Bhumi teachers and students increasingly understand the process to fill out the requisite forms, appear for the HSEB scholarship exam, monitor the newspaper carefully for the results, and queue at the HSEB office as early as possible on the specified days to get recommended for scholarship positions at private colleges in Kathmandu. With three batches of Bhumi graduates having now experienced higher secondary schooling in Kathmandu, they are able to advise others in the village about various colleges and their strengths and weaknesses. Younger siblings are gaining from the experience of their older brothers and sisters in their education choices and options. As an example, Sharad KC felt that his college cheated him by refusing to reimburse his fees even though he received an HSEB scholarship, and they never gave him the promised part-time job either (chapter seven). He thus advised not only his brother, who was a tenth grade student at the time, but also other Bhumi students to stay away from that college. Similarly, when Bhumi graduates returned to Bhumi to attend various functions such as award ceremonies or cultural programmes, current SLC students could regularly be seen asking these seniors for advice about prospective colleges based on their experiences.

These gains have often extended beyond immediate education pursuits for many Dadagaun villagers. As Parvati noted:

In the beginning, the medium [of instruction] was difficult. I was not familiar with the teachers either. I studied at Bhumi all my life before this, so I knew all the teachers but here everything was new. Of course the level of study was higher, but I could not understand the teachers either, but with time everything became easier.

Even to go to college, in the beginning I used to walk all the way there, because I was used to that. Sometimes if I was late, I had to take the micro-bus, but I would get worried about getting off at the right place, so I preferred to walk. But after a while, I got used to it, and then it saved me a lot of time. Science lab was also very scary because, as you know, our lab was like a cupboard. At college, everything was in English and most students were from boarding schools and they had used these things before, but I thought I would never be able to use them. Now, I am not scared anymore because I also know how to use the lab and we are all friends, but it took a while to get used to this. (09/26/2012)

Parvati's experience shows that regular access to Kathmandu has brought about a greater understanding of the city landscape, and young people are better able to navigate the capital city. The college infrastructure that was often imposing and alienating is becoming a

part of their lives, as young people become familiar to the terrain. While Bhumi catered exclusively to nearby communities, their colleges attract students from many other places throughout the country, so they are making friends with more people from diverse backgrounds. They are thus gaining important social and cultural capital through their education pursuits.

Even though many graduates have not been able to secure gainful employment in the country, new networks are emerging, especially abroad, where many villagers have now migrated for work. Foreign employment is not a unitary monolith, as different people with different skills are recruited to perform various jobs. Although most Dadagaun villagers have migrated to the Middle East, the work they do there, the conditions under which they perform, and their pay vary significantly. As Amit noted (in chapter eight), his lack of schooling credentials prevented him from getting promoted to a cook at a prestigious hotel, limiting both his experience and his earnings. As a result, he has now made a conscious choice to ensure that his son will stay in school at least till he completes secondary education, after which Amit will bring him to Dubai. His experience of foreign employment coupled with his observation of college graduates in Dadagaun (who spend all their time playing cards, he noted) has meant that he is planning a particular life trajectory for himself and his son. As Froerer noted with girl education in India, Amit is consciously making his son complete secondary education so that he does not get 'too little' education, but he is clear that 'too much' education could harm rather than help his son's cause.

Amit's plans are not limited to foreign employment. His newly constructed house already hosts an internet tower for a leading internet service provider, which ensures he gets free internet access at home. He discussed with me his plans to open an internet café in the village when he returns from Dubai:

Sir, do you think I should buy some computers? I have some money saved up, and I am thinking when I get back I will buy some second hand computers and let people use the internet from here. I already have enough rooms at the back of the house that are empty, so with this tower, I could provide internet quite cheaply. There are so many young people in this village, I am sure they would come to use it all the time. Maybe that's what I will do when I come back to Nepal for good.

While the fad of internet cafés has peaked in urban spaces, as private internet has become cheaper and more accessible, Dadagaun is yet to see a cyber café, so there is tremendous potential for profitable business. The young population is increasingly

enamoured by the changes taking place globally, as evidenced by the fixation with Western music, Korean TV stars (whose posters were plastered on all the walls of my rented room), and social media. Amit has gained the know-how to work with computers as well as earned some capital to invest in further projects in the village, providing him an avenue for further income upon his return.

The narrative presented here encapsulates the emerging life trajectories for migrant workers in Dadagaun. Since so many villagers are abroad, numerous migrants returned to Dadagaun for their holiday during my stay there. The atmosphere for family members, and particularly children and teenagers, associated with these returnees turn extremely festive. Returnees bring back gifts, particularly fancy watches and mobile phones, for their loved ones, and they are treated with a sense of pride. A big group of young villagers can be seen hanging out with these returnees regularly. These gatherings do not only provide the space to be merry (mostly financed by the returnees) but also to gain knowledge about migrating abroad. The village is acquiring a knowledge base through their own sons being abroad, and more and more men are looking for options given the frustration they experience in the country and the sense of opportunity that appears to lie ahead.

Dadagaun villagers have always relied on their networks to seek employment, but since their social capital has been limited to those working in blue-collar jobs, their opportunities have also been limited to predominantly menial jobs. Most young people consistently report that they feel no one in the village has been able to get a good job based on their education. At the same time, most of them are also failing to establish themselves through their educational pursuits because of the systemic challenges they face. As a result, more and more people are looking abroad to make ends meet. Together, their educational pursuits and the expansion of their networks are now opening up possibilities for them not in Dadagaun but in Kathmandu and beyond.

III. Between poverty, education, employment, and migration

I present here a brief life history of Ritesh Tamang to demonstrate both the challenges Dadagaun residents face as well as the opportunities that have emerged through their engagement with education and employment opportunities in recent years. The analysis will draw out Ritesh's own experiences as well as those of his extended family to tell an inter-generational story.

Ritesh Tamang was born in Dadagaun about 40 years ago, and he grew up in the village. His family was extremely poor, with his father's employment as an office helper the only source of stable income. They lived in a straw hut (*fushko ghar*) at the time, and he remembers the house burning down in 1985. His earliest memories are of walking behind his grandfather, begging for money. His father's salary was not enough to feed the family, so educating the children was out of the question. Ritesh did go to school for five or six years but schooling was never a serious endeavour. He remembers he did not have enough money to cut his hair, so the school principal would grab him by the hair and beat him till he [sometimes] wet himself. The extent of their poverty forced him to quit school and seek employment opportunities.

I used to really like studying. I used to be 3rd, 4th or 5th in class. I used to be quite talented. The greatest sadness is that I was poor. Poverty is a terrible thing, especially when we could smell the fried corn in other people's homes but we had to wait till night to eat. When we were struggling to eat, of course we had no money for pens or exercise books. There were no organizations to help us at that time. I cannot blame my parents either...they might have wished for me but they could do nothing in that situation. (14/10/2012)

His family circumstances thus directly dictated Ritesh's education and employment prospects. He was not even a teenager when he first moved to Kathmandu to look for work. He was hired by a hotel as a dishwasher. He remembers:

I was quite small at the time, but I had to wash really big utensils. The hotel dishes were big enough to cook for 500 people, so I would climb inside the *dekchi* [big cooking pot] to clean it. I worked very hard and in a few years I progressed to become 'third cook' there. I learned a lot there, and because of my experience I went to Malaysia to work as a staff cook.

Ritesh got married in Dadagaun, and the need for financial security to support his family was instrumental in his decision to migrate. His wife is from the same village, and when I asked them how they first became interested, they both became shy but reported that they would flirt with each other while working in people's fields during *melas* in Dadagaun. Once he moved abroad, he did not find the work in Malaysia to be very difficult. He worked long hours at the hotel but they got plenty of breaks, and the work was easy. He was quite happy with his pay, and they received an additional allowance for food, so that they could make meals of their own choice. He mentioned how he has read about the horrific labour conditions within which numerous Nepalis are working in the Middle East these days, but he had a very supportive employer.

If we made a mistake knowingly then we would be fired for sure. But the good thing is, if we are working hard, and if we are trying our best, then even if we make mistakes they would not fire us. They would teach us how to do it better, and we would try not to make the same mistake again.

After spending a few months as a cook in Malaysia, Ritesh got an unexpected opportunity to work as a builder for the same boss when an employee quit. Ritesh was asked to train for two months, where he learned how to mix various construction materials to build tarmac roads. Although this new position required some manual labour, the increased compensation package pleased him, and he learned to use heavy machinery as well as drive vehicles on the job. As he impressed at work, he was then promoted to work as a machine operator. He did not have to carry out any manual labour himself, but he found this job difficult because he had to think a lot.

We could not make any mistakes anymore. Everything is computerized. I would say, ok, so we need to make this big a hole [shows with hands]. Then I would write this length and this breadth, say 8 by 2.5...then I just wrote that on the machine and it would just make that hole. All of it worked through magnet, and it was exact. But we had to make sure everything was straight otherwise the block would not drop. It was easy work but it was also hard work. The owner liked me too, and he gave me 650 if others made 500.

Although Ritesh was satisfied with his work and pay in Malaysia, he decided to return to Nepal after three years because he got homesick. He had left behind his wife and children as well as his extended family, and he did not enjoy living abroad for so long. At the time, he was making about Rs 20,000 a month, and the company owner offered him another Rs 5000, and even sanctioned a leave for two months so he could visit his family. However, Ritesh's heart was no longer in it so he decided to quit and move back to Nepal. He explained further:

Money is not the biggest thing in the world. Family is very important, and I have to spend time with them too. How will my uneducated wife give education to my children if I am not there? As a father, I have to be there and support them. What else can I do? There are so many others, who make a lot of money, but their wives and kids are not good...they are very spoilt and take drugs, so I felt it was not good to stay behind [in Malaysia].

Ritesh thus tied his return to Nepal not only to missing his family but also to provide education for his children. Although he had only attended school for a few years, he still felt that his schooling had played an important role in his life. He claimed that a few years of schooling at the time was no less than getting a 10+2 (higher education) degree now. He would not have been literate if he had not attended school, and he noted that one had to know at least some broken English to survive abroad. Even though his first job abroad was in a

kitchen where his academic qualifications did not mean much, he remembers he was still interviewed for the position and he had to produce his schooling certificates at the time.

To wash dishes you don't need grades....but I would not be washing dishes all the time. I would be someone more than that too...When the Captain gives English information, I would at least have to know something to understand that, so even a few years of education has helped me a lot...I have to be thankful for that. If I did not know *ka, kha* [the first letters of the Nepali alphabet] or *abcd*, I don't think I would be in this position.

When Ritesh returned to Dadagaun, he started a small grocery shop in the village. He rented a room at a central house to grow his business but it was not very profitable. He had saved about Rs. 300,000 from Malaysia but he was soon losing money. After eight months, he decided to close his shop and started looking for jobs to make ends meet. However, he could not find anything to do in Nepal:

Experience alone is not enough...we need a certificate too. These days you need 12th grade even to be a cook. I went to school but I did not stay long enough, so I could not get any jobs. I started wandering and losing money, which would only last another year or so. I was getting frustrated so I decided to return abroad to make more money.

This time, his destination was Qatar. Despite his own experiences abroad only a couple of years ago, he could not justify remaining home so he went back as a cook. The pay was relatively good, at Rs. 26,000 a month, but he soon began missing his family again. He saved some money but once again the frustration got the better of him, so he decided to quit in 18 months and return to Nepal. His contract stipulated that he would be provided a return ticket to Nepal after three years, but he could not bear the thought of living away for so long, so he paid for his own flight back.

Ritesh did not only gain experiences and save money during his abroad trips, but he also found religion. While in Malaysia, he describes how he got violently ill. He had very high blood pressure and could no longer work efficiently. He went to see many doctors but they could not diagnose him, and he had given up hope. At that time, a friend of his came to him and said that he had tried many different treatments, but there is one person who knows it all. The friend asked if he could say a prayer for Ritesh, who recalls thus:

At the time, I had not told anyone at home that I was sick. I was worried if I could even make it home or not. I said you can pray for me when he asked. He prayed for me for half an hour...put me in *prabhu's* hand...Jesus Christ's hand. I felt slightly released. He came regularly after that, then I felt I was getting better. You might find it hard to digest and to believe, but this is what happened. My friend said if you want to continue with the church, we will keep telling you about Christ. I felt I had to

believe because I got better because of the prayers, even though the doctors had not been able to help me. I went every week and I started thinking it must be true.

As Ritesh became more engaged with the Christian community, he began to reform himself. He used to drink a lot and would not hesitate to swear, but he slowly gave up both these 'bad habits'. He began saving more money because he was not drinking, and he also began reading more because he wanted to understand the bible. His life transformed within a matter of months, and even though the pastor insisted that he consult his family (who were in Nepal), he decided that he did not want to live without Christ in his life, so he got baptized before returning to Nepal. As he put it, "Maybe it is my luck, but because of a disease I got to meet God." At various points of our conversations during the year, he thus emphasized different motivations even for his return to Qatar. He was frustrated about his employment in Nepal, but he was also keen to spread Christianity, because he felt he had benefited so much from the conversion. Although following Christianity was a lot more difficult in Qatar than in Malaysia, he remembers enjoying the opportunity to tell his stories to people in Qatar.

The trajectory of Ritesh's conversion to Christianity is representative of religious conversions in Dadagaun. As noted earlier, about 30% of Dadagaun families have now converted to Christianity in recent years. The most common narrative of conversion centres on unexplained illnesses that have been healed through prayers. Ritesh's immediate family were happy to follow his lead and convert to Christianity, but this is not to suggest that the conversion was harmonious for everyone. His father would often find me in the evenings when he was drunk and lament how his son has given away his religion and so he would have no one to perform his death rites. There was thus some intergenerational friction around religious conversions, even though the vast majority of villagers lived in harmony.

When Ritesh returned from Qatar, he opened another shop in the village, which he still owns. His religion and his aspirations came together when he started praying regularly for economic stability for his family, as well as prosperity for his village. "If your house is strong then the village will be strong as well, and then the whole nation." Although his grocery shop was doing satisfactory business, his fortune especially changed when land prices sky-rocketed in Dadagaun. Until recently, the hilly land in Dadagaun was mostly used for agriculture, and one *ropani* of land cost about Rs. 400,000. However, as described earlier, the rapidly increasing population density in Kathmandu has pushed the growing middle class to seek holiday homes and urban escapes in surrounding hill villages including the picturesque Dadagaun. As a result, Ritesh, like many other villagers, was able to sell a *ropani*

for Rs. 3,200,000. The financial windfall from this transaction opened numerous opportunities for him.

Ritesh could use some of the money to expand his shop, but he used a bulk of the money for other investments. First, he was able to buy some land in another district, which gave them some financial security. Second, he also bought a mini-truck with some of the money, which he used to transport construction goods from the capital to the village. He had learned to drive while working abroad, so when the driver he hired started drinking and acting irresponsibly, he began to drive the truck himself. The influx of money into the village through land sale meant that people had some disposable income to build cement houses or covered toilets. He thus carried cement, bricks, and building rods to Dadagaun, giving villagers preferential rates so it was always cheaper to hire him. His investments paid substantial dividends, but his deteriorating health convinced him to sell the truck a year and a half later. He now focuses on his grocery shop, which is less demanding and allows him flexible working hours.

Ritesh is using his experiences from abroad to develop Dadagaun as well. He serves as a leader in the village *guthi* and is also the president of *Sarokar Samaaj*, a local development organization. As noted in chapter five, villagers have come together to build tarmac roads to connect the village to the capital for the first time, and Ritesh is at the forefront of this endeavour. The technical skills he learned building tarmac roads abroad have been put to use in their own construction, saving the village money and allowing them to hold their hired construction workers and engineers accountable. Although he is a Christian and the pastor of the village, he also led the *deusi bhailo* programme¹¹³ to solicit donations to restore a historic Hindu temple-house in the village. He is an active member of Dadagaun and is at the forefront of most discussions concerning the well-being of the village.

This snapshot of Ritesh's life story provides some key insights to understand village life in the outskirts of Kathmandu valley. He was born in a poor family and could not continue his schooling, but he got some work experience in the capital before travelling abroad to make ends meet. Even a few years of schooling helped him progress further, but his access to numerous lucrative jobs was limited because he did not have the right credentials. His life changed dramatically through his religious conversion, and the sale of his land gave him the financial freedom to be able to pursue business opportunities. The skills he acquired

¹¹³ A song-dance programme performed during Tihar, one of two major Hindu festivals in Nepal.

while abroad have helped him secure his financial as well as social standing in the village, and he is now well-respected in Dadagaun.

The centrality of education opportunity remains even within this trajectory. As noted earlier, a key reason for Ritesh's return from abroad was to educate his children, because he was worried his wife would not be able to supervise them. Two of his three daughters graduated from Bhumi and are now pursuing higher education in Kathmandu, while his youngest daughter is about to finish primary school. He can now send his daughters to a local private school, but he is happy with Bhumi, so he did not want to send them anywhere else. The teachers at Bhumi work very hard, he said, so even if it is a government school, it is not like the others. He acknowledges that the level of English at Bhumi might not be the same as private schools, but he is happy with Bhumi nonetheless. The school also consult him and other parents on important matters, and he feels involved in the process. His eldest daughter secured a high distinction in the SLC, and he was very hopeful about supporting her further education. Bhumi teachers were instrumental in ensuring that she got a Higher Secondary Education Board scholarship to continue till 12th grade. However, the scholarship does not cover all costs, and colleges keep sending bills with the students. Ritesh knows he should not have to pay these fees, but he is tired of contesting the charges each time. The private school where his daughter studies keeps threatening that she will not get to appear for her exams, so Ritesh is forced to pay these extra fees. The provision of scholarship alone is not enough, then, as its execution can place significant burdens on the poor. Ritesh has managed so far, but is worried about the next hurdle, when she completes 12th grade.

He dreamed of her going to medical school, but once he found out about the costs, he is resigned about their opportunities.

We are poor people. Who will send our children to medical school? We do not know anybody so our children will not get scholarships even if they are *janajati*. The only thing I can do is sell land, but even if I sell all my land it will still not be enough to cover just her first five years. But how can I sell all the land when I have a family and other daughters too? I have to be realistic and tell my daughter she cannot be a doctor. Poor people cannot really become doctors, no matter how talented they are.

Ritesh and his family acknowledge that higher education can make a meaningful difference to their lives, but they are resigned that their poverty and their lack of social capital limit their opportunities. In Dadagaun and surrounding villages, Ritesh is a well-connected man. He is liked and respected, and he has a sphere of influence. His abroad experiences have further helped establish his position through the technical skills and cultural capital he has

acquired. His international links have also helped him counsel others as they prepare to go abroad, and his own brother is working in the Middle East. He can read and write, and knows some English, all of which help him in his everyday life. His experiences have also convinced him about the value of education. He remembers:

I had a friend who had passed SLC, he was one of the 19 people who went to Malaysia with me. He was a production worker, but he had studied at a boarding in Dang and so he could speak English fluently. He started by making 550, but after finding out about his background they gave him a computer entry job. His salary almost doubled within six months. The boss liked me a lot and gave me easy job and good pay but my uneducated salary would never come close to what my friend made.

Despite this belief in education and his desire to educate his daughters, however, he is also conscious of the limitations of his resources and his networks. His eldest daughter has excelled in school and he is proud of her, but he is aware that he cannot fulfil all her dreams and aspirations. There are a few scholarships available to poor students, but in his experience these opportunities are often reserved for those with the right connections. He will continue to support his daughters, but he is conscious of the ceiling that will contain their opportunities. There is an undeniable sense of resignation as he wonders about the future of his children, even as he is well aware that he is one of the more fortunate ones in the village.

IV. Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter has been two-fold. First, I have shown here the positive outcomes that have emerged as a result of mass schooling and its implications in Dadagaun in recent years. Formal schooling has contributed to increased literacy, higher age of marriage for women, and the emergence of new networks in higher education and employment. The emergence of foreign migration has also opened up new horizons and made people aware of the range of employment possibilities outside the country. Second, I have relied on the life story of Ritesh to demonstrate the nuances of the interaction between education, employment, migration, and transition within a household. There is no singular trajectory through education as originally expected by villagers, but their engagement with formal schooling demonstrates the emergence of multiple, diverse aspirations, experiences and outcomes along the way. To the extent that opportunities have opened up as a result of formal schooling, they nonetheless remain limited in many ways for people from poor communities who cannot draw on significant cultural capital or social networks. If the political-economic circumstances had been conducive to provide extensive support to meet the education aspirations of the poor and to absorb the newly-educated masses through gainful

employment, perhaps these education-employment trajectories would have been different. As things stand, however, foreign migration appears attractive, where formal schooling is not necessarily leading to significant new opportunities but it still provides room for differentiation within the international labour market. The emergence of these migratory routes and the resulting accumulation of social and cultural capital are also directly affecting people's aspirations and expectations from formal schooling.

10. Conclusion

I. Introduction

In this thesis, I have used ethnographic and participatory research methods to examine the role and relevance of formal schooling with particular reference to education outcomes and employment opportunities for people from poor and marginalized communities. In this concluding chapter, I first reiterate what I set out to investigate in this thesis (section two), summarize my findings (section three), and draw conclusions about its implication for theory and future research (section four).

II. The Research

From the outset, my interest had been to investigate the relationship between education and employment, particularly as it affects the socio-economic mobility for people from poor and marginalized communities in Nepal. The development discourse on education is dominated by the expectation that formal schooling is central to providing people with better opportunities, but theoretical and empirical questions about such expectations for the poor remain. This research examines some of these questions, and is situated within the debate on whether formal schooling facilitates greater freedoms or reproduces existing inequalities in society. It addressed the following questions: first, what are people's experiences and aspirations—which are often linked—from education at the individual level? What choices, to the extent that they are available, do people make in these pursuits, and how do their decisions affect their outcomes? Second, at the systemic level, how does formal schooling address the needs of the poor? In particular, what is the quality of education in public schools and how do they prepare poor students? Third, how do these educational outcomes relate to higher education and employment realities at the local, national, and international levels? How do public school graduates perform, and to what extent are they prepared to cope with the future? In asking these questions, I sought to understand the role education plays as both a social good and a positional good in developing countries in general and Nepal in particular. The theoretical underpinning for these questions centred on how education systems relate to wider socio-cultural and political-economic developments, which in turn affects education and employment outcomes. I also compared trajectories from education to employment opportunities in order to examine if they are linear and unidirectional, including for the poor and the marginalized. I queried whether people's backgrounds affected their horizontal and vertical transitions as they managed school, work,

and home life. The deepening of the analysis provided further insights into perceptions of what constitutes education quality, how and in what ways schooling outcomes can be reliably assessed (including through examinations), and ultimately how education and employment aspirations, opportunities, and outcomes interact over time and across generations.

III. The Findings

The evidence from Dadagaun and Bhumi provides a vivid but complex picture of the relationship between education and employment. An inter-generational analysis demonstrates that the parent generation places a high value on education and aspires for their children to pursue formal schooling as the primary means to social mobility. These hopes, which are consistent with the dominant development discourse, are derived from the historical role of formal schooling as a tool for differentiation in the village, where those with even a few years of schooling have managed to consolidate their position of privilege. Since most parents tie their poverty closely to their lack of education, almost all school-age children emphatically pursue schooling with the expectation of a better life. As a result, mass schooling has become an unequivocal norm in and around Dadagaun, irrespective of caste, class, geography, or religion. Most of these children are extremely poor and the sacrifices they make to continue their education is testimony to the high perceived value of education in the region.

This faith in the education system has been further sustained because of the excellent performance of Bhumi School in recent years. Despite the general decline of public school outcomes in South Asia in general and Nepal in particular, Bhumi students have consistently performed well in the School Leaving Certificate examinations. The dedication of school teachers, development of positive pedagogical practices, and creative use of school and community resources demonstrate the key role empowered agents can play in promoting positive education outcomes despite systemic problems within the public school system. The relative success of Bhumi graduates has thus further bolstered Dadagaun educational aspirations.

Despite these successes at the secondary level, the experiences of young Bhumi graduates and Dadagaun residents in higher education and employment give rise to a narrative of frustration and disappointment that exists in tandem with the more aspirational discourse. Their lack of economic, social, and cultural capital has significantly hampered their ability to transition to and succeed in higher education, with an overwhelming majority of public school graduates labelled as failures within two years of appearing for the SLC.

Although some pupils access government scholarships that attempt to facilitate this transition, numerous systemic problems with the design, monitoring, and execution of these scholarships undermine their impact. Bhumi students also lack access to effective social networks to support their quest for higher education opportunities, and the high associated costs of higher education place significant economic burdens on poor families.

The change in language instruction to English, the language of aspiration, limits the academic achievement of Bhumi graduates. Further, the cultural challenges associated with pursuing higher education in a major city, in schools with modern infrastructure and equipment, create daunting obstacles for students from rural villages who previously studied in poorly-funded schools. Seemingly benign private school policies concerning punctuality and private property often place undue burden on poor students. The opportunity costs of further education keep increasing, especially as urgent demands to earn a living undermine aspirations for tertiary education. Thus, a combination of economic constraints (such as living far from college and having to work in the mornings) *and* cultural constraints (such as not being fluent in English and lacking familiarity with middle-class ways) causes even high-performing Bhumi graduates to fail terminal and final exams in higher education.

These problems have enormous impact on young people who are looking for work, severely curtailing their employment opportunities. They seek jobs that will provide an adequate income, and they are deeply concerned about gaining recognition and status through their employment. However, their academic credentials are not enough to make them competitive in the job market, especially for the white-collar jobs to which they aspire. A close analysis of school performance before and after the SLC also demonstrates that students are not learning much, even when they pass national exams. Graduates are finding that their employment opportunities are unrelated to academic performance since social networks have emerged as the principal tool for obtaining employment, and their low level of networks do not allow them entry into high quality jobs.

Despite the constraints young people experience in transitioning from secondary to tertiary education and employment, socio-economic circumstances in Dadagaun are quite dynamic. Land sale, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, and raised youth aspirations alongside frustrated expectations have together provided the impetus for numerous villagers to seek out other opportunities, such as migrating for employment, particularly to the Middle East. Only men have gone abroad for such work, and they often

face harsh working conditions. Nevertheless, migrants have generally been able to save and send remittances to their families. While the type of work they carry out abroad is similar to the employment opportunities open to them in Nepal, they benefit significantly financially from the strength of the foreign currency in which they get paid. The recent focus on Nepali migrants in the media has highlighted the adversity they face, but Dadagaun residents increasingly prioritize migratory aspirations over educational ones. The relative success of their migration coupled with the growing frustration about education outcomes locally has thus meant that they are now re-evaluating the wider role of education. Many pursue their education only until they have gained the credentials needed for employment.

The pursuit of education has not led to the kind of meaningful outcomes Dadagaun residents desired, but this is not to say that no positive outcomes exist. Formal schooling has helped increase literacy rates steadily in recent years. The age of marriage is increasing for girls as they stay in school longer and so are not pressured to get married young. As a new generation goes through mass schooling, they are becoming better informed about education opportunities and are therefore more likely to be able to guide their children through the system. The social and cultural capital they have gained through formal schooling, albeit meagre, is more likely to be inherited by their children, which could provide the impetus for future gains. The establishment of migratory networks has also provided an alternative avenue for socio-economic mobility, and seasonal migrants have returned to become entrepreneurs, fuelling the local economy. Even among the migrants, the employment market is not monolithic, and some differentiation exists in terms of job opportunities and pay grades based on their schooling. The role and relevance of education is thus evolving.

Gender equality appears to have been achieved in Dadagaun in terms of school enrolment and even school performance up to the secondary level. However, the relationship becomes more complicated after secondary schooling. When girls continue with their education, they are less likely to marry at a young age, but those who fail their exams and drop out inevitably get married immediately. Boys who drop out, however, do not get married but seek employment and become marginal workers in the local economy. Regardless of their education levels, girls are expected to work more than boys at home (in a household with both sons and daughters), and are also less likely to be able to work in the formal economy, particularly because of alleged concerns of safety. Even though the agrarian economy depends almost exclusively on women, they identify themselves as unemployed

because this is not paid work. They have also not been able to migrate abroad, which has been the most lucrative path to economic success in recent years.

The findings of this thesis provide a critique for the life-stages model, which is both deterministic and linear in its conceptualization of the life-course. The expectation that children will achieve adulthood by going to school, acquiring skills and knowledge, and then securing employment is simplistic and unrepresentative of the experiences of young people. Instead, children balance numerous paid and unpaid responsibilities in the household and informal economy, often as a means to continue their education. The success with which they balance these horizontal transitions between school, work and home often determines the nature of their vertical transitions through secondary schooling, higher education, and gainful employment. Their poverty thus becomes especially relevant to their transitions since they are expected to contribute significantly to the household economy even as they pursue their schooling. At the same time, the experience of formal schooling has not led to the acquisition of the skills and knowledge young people need to secure meaningful employment and assume 'adult' responsibilities. An overwhelming majority of public school students are labelled as failures by the school system, and even those who pass remain unemployed or under-employed in the context where academic qualification alone is not enough to get jobs.

IV. Implications for theory and future work

What are the implications of these findings for theory and future work? The first modest contribution of this thesis is to show the dynamism with which people shape, change, and adapt their aspirations. While Appadurai contends that poor people often lack the capacity to aspire, I show instead that they are extremely practical and realistic about their aspirations based on their circumstances. In agreement with Crivello (2009), I find that they often lack the capacity to achieve their aspirations, leading to frustration and disappointment. Under such circumstances, as we have seen with the younger generation in Dadagaun, they adapt their aspirations to look for alternative pathways to success, such as through foreign employment.

I have shown in this thesis that the nature of the education available to people from poor and marginalized communities limits them to a particular position towards the bottom of the social hierarchy. Following Bourdieu (1986, 1984, 1977), the lack of economic, social, and cultural capital is seen to affect both school access and outcomes directly, which in turn impinges on employment opportunities. The Bhumi case shows that poor students from rural

communities can overcome adversity to succeed within the public school system, but such outcomes are only possible under exceptional circumstances. However, Bhumi graduates still face challenges transitioning to high education, thus validating the Bourdieusian analysis, which argues that different forms of capital ultimately determine schooling outcomes. Success or failure within the school system, usually assessed by school examinations, helps determine future education and employment opportunities, as education is not only a social but also, partly, a positional good. I show here that the education levels of others play a crucial role in determining the returns to one's own schooling. Because the education opportunities available to poor people are often inferior quantitatively (in terms of number of years of schooling) and qualitatively (in terms of their learning outcomes), they remain relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder.

The problem of low returns to education is compounded by the social and economic circumstances of those at the margins of society. As the history of employment opportunities and life trajectories across different generations in Dadagaun shows, most people get jobs through their social networks rather than their academic or other qualifications. If poor people were to perform exceptionally well up to the tertiary level, perhaps they would be able to secure meaningful employment, but given the extent of their education and their networks, the jobs of their dreams remain beyond their reach. As such, it is not only the role but also the relevance of education as a tool for emancipation that is being questioned here.

Emancipation is but one possible end of education. This thesis is deeply concerned with the context and nuance that can often be overlooked in generalized theories. The core of the analysis has focused on how education pursuits have not led to meaningful employment outcomes and ultimately socio-economic mobility for the poor and the marginalized. Respondents consistently reported their overwhelming sense of frustration and disappointment at their inability to secure meaningful employment based on their education investment. In spite of this initial response, their quotes demonstrate that education continues to be valued for its properties as a social good. This thesis thus builds on Crivello's notion of how young people use education more broadly than simply to obtain qualifications, to "become somebody". While becoming a professional or simply obtaining employment is a key educational aspiration, formal schooling allows people to acquire many other skills and qualities. For instance, Dadagaun villagers associate schooling with acquiring credentials and literacy, which help them in their everyday lives and thus contribute towards feeling a sense of dignity and self-respect.

Building on the work of Valentin (2012), Levinson, Foley and Holland (1996), Pigg (1992), and others, I examine how education is closely tied to notions of modernity. Formal schooling becomes a direct vehicle for students to escape their [parent's] past life since village life and agricultural work are considered to be domains of the illiterate. At the most immediate level, the pursuit of education has allowed villagers to explore urban spaces as they engage with higher education institutes and seek employment. Such engagement expands their social networks and helps them acquire the practical skills and knowledge that facilitates the navigation of these new terrains. Education thus cannot be reduced to either a positional or social good, but has to be understood in terms of its multiple characteristics.

It is clear that the core understanding of childhood has changed in recent years, with schooling firmly rooted as an integral part of every child's growth. Access to education has always been limited in rural parts of the developing world, but the Nepali case shows how access to primary and even secondary education has improved drastically. Education was a luxury of the elite in past generations, but as mass schooling has firmly taken hold, it is unthinkable for children to not attend school in most circumstances. Notions of poverty, marginalization, and 'backwardness' have been closely internalized as associated with the lack of education, leading to schooling becoming accepted as a marker of childhood as opposed to just "wasting time" as was thought previously. However, the emphasis on schooling does not preclude the need for children to contribute to the household economy; instead, young boys and girls are required to balance their schooling with household work and, at times, in the informal economy. The difficulty of managing these horizontal transitions between home, work, and school directly affect the vertical transitions from schooling to higher education and employment opportunities for poor students.

In addition to these findings, this research speaks to the debate on what constitutes education quality. The rise and fall of Bhumi graduates in secondary and higher education respectively demonstrate the fallibility of examinations as the principal marker of quality. Exam results reflect student and school performance at singular moments, but these can be doctored and abused to serve specific purposes. Normatively, this leads me to conclude that we need a more comprehensive, holistic understanding of education quality that takes into account not just students' circumstances and backgrounds but also the capacity and interests of teachers, parents, and the wider community. The socio-economic background of students, the language of instruction, and the inclusiveness of the school system all contribute towards school quality and education outcomes. While the quality debate is dominated by matrices

and numerical measurements, other factors, such as extra-curricular activities, uniform, hygiene, and sense of school identity affect student performance and determine success. Success is primarily measured by factors internal to the school system (such as enrolment, attendance, and graduation rates) but extending the scope of analysis to include post-graduate transitions can contextualize schooling outcomes further. The challenges for public schools serve as an indictment of the current education system, and they highlight the need for better, more effective, accountability and transparency mechanisms to support poor students.

A key argument in this thesis has been that people's life trajectories are neither linear nor unidirectional. The findings of this thesis, particularly concerning the relationship between education and employment, should be understood within this wider context, allowing for fluidity and adaptability within the broader trends that have been captured here. The life stories that inform this thesis represent the subtleties and nuances of the opportunities and constraints that shape people's life trajectories, and they are meant to be representative of the larger trends observed in Bhumi and Dadagaun even as they speak to and contribute modestly towards wider debates on education, employment, and transitions.

I conclude with a final note on the next steps. I reflected on potential areas for further research in chapter four, where I emphasized that any study of transitions and trajectories is incomplete if we do not follow them across different generations. The students in this thesis form the first generation to undergo mass schooling in the region, and their triumphs and tribulations will further shape the aspirations and experiences of the next generation. The Hindus in Forerer's case study appear to no longer pursue secondary schooling for particular reasons, but it is too early to determine whether education aspirations will change similarly in Dadagaun. Education's value as a social good provides the impetus for the pursuit of formal schooling in the coming years, but its properties as a positional good can relegate people from poor and marginalized communities to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder. Further research will be necessary to distinguish the path these villagers take, but if their education opportunities and outcomes continue to remain inferior to the rest of society, it appears unlikely that education alone can provide the impetus for their socio-economic mobility. If the education system is perceived to have failed the poor because it is considered to be of low quality or irrelevant to gainful employment, early trends indicate that, ironically, education will be pursued in even more functional terms. The rise of credentialism has meant that education is increasingly a necessary but not a sufficient tool, which encourages even the poor to pursue education to the extent that it provides them proper credentials for

employment opportunities at home or abroad. The education system must cater more directly to the poor and the marginalized if we truly expect education to be the catalyst for their empowerment.

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