YOUTH, ASPIRATION, AND MOBILITY

YOUNG PEOPLE DEBATING THEIR POTENTIAL FUTURES IN NEPAL

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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2015

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This work was supported by
the Scatcherd Scholarship Scheme, and
the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/I025073/1].

Word count: 85,136

Abstract

This study is centrally concerned with young people's capacity to identify and realise promising educational and occupational pathways. Whilst it is now well established among social scientists that young people have agency, much less is known about what types of agency young people might demonstrate. Based on field research conducted in 2011-2012 with a group of young people studying, working, and living in Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu, the present study scrutinises Western-inspired approaches prevalent in the scholarship on youth which equate agency to resistance and individuality. It does so, by bringing the literature on youth agency into conversation with theoretical work on the concepts of aspiration and mobility. Through an in-depth analysis of young people's time-space-strategies, the thesis contributes to existing literature in three ways: First, it shows that young people may grow in power as they learn to fulfil social obligations and foster stronger relationships with other people. Second, it illustrates that young people's agency may not only take the form of observable practices, but may also reside in young people's active efforts to think through their options for improving their own and other people's situation. Third, it highlights the importance of young people's spatial mobilities and immobilities in negotiating various social pressures and in developing a sense of themselves as competent, educated, and successful people. The findings of this thesis are, therefore, of relevance to the interdisciplinary field of youth studies as well as to emerging debates in geography about the apparent need to produce 'aspirational citizens' and about the meanings attached to spatial (im)mobility in contemporary societies.

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ARWU	Academic Ranking of World Universities
BBA	Bachelor of Business Administration
BBS	Bachelor of Business Studies
CBS	Central Bureau of Statistics
CCCS	Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies
CUREC	Central University Research Ethics Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRE	Graduate Record Examinations
HR	Human Resources
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
INGO	International Non-governmental Organisation
KU	Kathmandu University
MoF	Ministry of Finance
MoYS	Ministry of Youth and Sports
MSc	Master of Science
NDS	National Development Service
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NSU	Nepal Student Union (affiliated to Nepali Congress)
Rs.	Nepali Rupees
SLC	School Leaving Certificate
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
TU	Tribhuvan University
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
US	United States of America
USD	US Dollars
USEF	United States Education Foundation

Acknowledgements

My sincere thanks go to everyone who made it possible for me to conduct and successfully complete this research – be it through their active participation and interest, academic guidance and mentoring, dedicated assistance and constructive feedback, financial support and administrative facilitation, much-needed encouragements and friendships, or reassuring trust and love. Thank you.

आफ्नो सक्रिय सहयोग, प्राज्ञिक निर्देशन तथा सल्लाह, निरन्तर सहायता तथा सकारात्मक प्रतिक्रिया, आर्थिक सहयोग, प्रशासनिक सुविधा, अत्यावश्यक प्रोत्साहन तथा मित्रता अनि विश्वास तथा प्रेम प्रदान गरेर यो अनुसन्धानलाई संचालन एवम् पूर्णता दिनला लागि सहयोग गर्नुहुने सबैलाई म हृदयबाट आभार व्यक्त गर्दछु । धन्यवाद ।

Mein aufrichtiger Dank geht an alle, die mir ermöglicht haben, diese Forschungsarbeit durchzuführen und erfolgreich fertigzustellen – sei es durch ihre aktive Teilnahme und ihr Interesse, akademische Anleitung und Begleitung, engagierte Mitarbeit und konstruktiven Gedankenaustausch, finanzielle Unterstützung und administrative Wegbereitung, dringend benötigte Ermutigungen und Freundschaften, oder bestärkendes Vertrauen und Liebe. Vielen Dank.

Introduction

This study elucidates one of the conundrums for social scientists involved in research on topics of youth. Young people are commonly found to be highly aspirational as regards their potential futures and, at the same time, they are acutely aware of a range of persisting constraints that make it unlikely for them to realise their hopes for a better future. Educational expansion, economic restructuring, technological modernisation, and international migration have opened up new horizons of opportunity. In view of these large-scale developments, wider society commonly rests its hope for progress and prosperity on the younger generation, which is expected to emerge as new future leaders and change agents (e.g. Cole and Durham 2008). Persisting social, economic, and political constraints, however, obstruct young people's efforts to realise the hope for a better future life. This discrepancy between aspirations and practicable avenues is a challenge confronted by young people across the world (e.g. Davidson 2011; Jeffrey 2010b; Katz 2004; Lukose 2010; Punch 2002; Sommers 2012). Much of the relevant debate revolves around the potential social effects of this apparent 'crisis' of youth (Weiss 2004: 14–16). Young people seem to be increasingly unable to resolve their own difficulties, let alone the problems faced by their respective societies. This has given rise to concerns that young people might release their frustration in a rebellious and potentially destructive manner, causing harm to themselves and others (e.g. Sommers 2012; Verkaaik 2004; Vigh 2006). On the other hand, some scholars have argued that young people's disillusionment tends to foster a sense of boredom and apathy, which in turn runs the risk of their youthful resourcefulness going to waste or being channelled into wayward actions (e.g. Hansen 2005; Jeffrey 2010b; Mains 2012; Ralph 2008). In a similar vein, the popular media and policymakers commonly emphasise that there is a pressing need to promote meaningful youth participation in order to prevent adverse social effects (e.g. World Bank 2007). The image generated through such debates is one in which youth are seen to be either the makers or the breakers of future society (Honwana and de Boeck 2005).

This way of framing the life experiences of young people is useful in many respects. Young people are no longer treated as troubled victims of political and economic transformations. Instead, it is now well established in social scientific research that young people are active agents in their own right, capable of negotiating the structuring forces

and social pressures that shape their young lives (e.g. Holloway and Valentine 2000b; James, Jenks, and Prout 1998; Willis 1977; Wulff 1995). By taking serious young people's own ways of thinking about their situations, researchers have been able to contribute new perspectives on issues at the centre of public policy and social action, including education, employment, politics, migration, civil society, and social welfare. Increasingly, however, scholars working with young people have been called upon to move beyond what might be immediately useful in terms of policymaking and to connect with intellectual debates about the concepts and questions that are at the very centre of social scientific research (e.g. Evans 2008; Hanson Thiem 2009; Horton and Kraftl 2005, 2006). As part of this discussion, researchers have only just begun to investigate the extent to which existing conceptualisations that shape research with youth tend to reinforce stereotypical ideas attached to young people's behaviour and their role in wider society (see, for example, the debate between Roberts (2007) and Wyn and Woodman (2006, 2007)).

The principal aim of the present study is therefore to scrutinise some of the conceptual ideas that underlie prevalent depictions of youth as the makers or the breakers of future society. Precisely because there has been above all a consistent theoretical concern to show that young people have agency, many scholars involved in research on young people's lives have frequently looked for instances in which young people broke with established social norms and resisted cultural hegemonies. As a result, much of the existing literature on youth assimilates young people's agency to acts of liberation, resistance, and deviance. Such a narrow perspective on youth agency, however, runs the risk of reinforcing pervasive and often polarising depictions of youth. In order to broaden our understanding of young people's collective actions and potential social implications, I therefore contend that it is necessary to ask: What types of agency do young people demonstrate?

In this thesis, I address this research question based on the insights I gained into the time-space-strategies of a group of young people, who, in 2011-2012, were all studying, working, and living in Nepal's capital city, Kathmandu. Over the course of nine months of field research, I spoke with these young Nepalis about their educational and occupational experiences and they shared with me which aspirations and anxieties they had with regard to their own future lives. Based on these conversations, I unpack particularly critical durations in young people's lives, where the decision they had to make with regard to their educational and occupational careers was likely to be of significance for their future life chances. I am particularly attentive to the ways in which young people's choices and related future orientations linked to gender, caste/ ethnic, and class identities and to the places around which young people's lives were organised. In so doing, I identify some of the social influences and structuring forces that influenced young people in their

attempts to map out potential future pathways. At one level, this thesis is therefore a study in the social geography of the educational and occupational trajectories and future orientations of young people in urban Nepal.

I furthermore examine how young people's agency might be theorised in such a manner as to better account for the uneven and often unexpected ways in which young people forge a future. I argue that young people in Nepal developed a sense of agency not primarily by asserting their own individuality and by opposing social norms. Instead, they were careful to consider how others may be affected by their decisions as they genuinely strove to conform to established notions of social respectability. I also show that expressions of young people's agency may not only take the form of practices as they are performed and observed in the present. Thinking ahead and anticipating the consequences of one's own actions were likewise seen to be important virtues that allowed a young person to gain social respect and to build a successful future life. In addition, I highlight the importance of young people's spatial mobilities and immobilities in negotiating various social pressures and in developing a sense of themselves as competent, educated, and successful people. The empirical findings presented in this thesis highlight the varied nature of young people's agency and, in so doing, help to move beyond dualistic categorisations of youth: conformist versus deviant, aspirational versus apathetic, mobile versus immobile. The insights I gained into young people's lives in Kathmandu are, therefore, of relevance not only to studies of youth but also to emerging debates in geography about the apparent need to produce 'aspirational citizens' and about the meanings attached to spatial (im)mobility in contemporary societies.

I consider issues of youth, aspiration, and mobility through telling the story of the young women and young men I met in Kathmandu. These young people were born in the mid-1980s and hence belonged to the first generation of Nepalis for whom formal education had become accessible to large sections of society. Drawing on existing literature, I trace the historical circumstances which have shaped their young lives during the past three decades. I show that the public discourses during this time have manifested a specific idea of what it means to be a part of the country's educated youth in terms of both social privileges and obligations (Chapter Three). In my conversations with young Nepalis, it became apparent that it seemed to be no longer sufficient for them to simply replicate the life paths and achievements of their parents' generation. Instead, they felt encouraged to aspire to attain higher levels of education and to engage in jobs outside traditional sectors. In order to take full advantage of newly emerging educational opportunities, it seemed to be necessary for young people to move beyond the confines of their familiar environment and to relocate to the capital city or further abroad (Chapter Four). At the same time, these young Nepalis were acutely aware that it would be difficult

for them to gain social recognition for their educational credentials and to carve out a lucrative career based on the skills and qualifications they attained. Faced with a range of persisting structural constraints and socio-spatial inequalities, young Nepalis were anxious about lagging behind their peers from more privileged family backgrounds (Chapter Five). Despite these complications, young people kept up their efforts to juggle study, work, and family commitments in parallel. It was often through modest appropriations of dominant educational and occupational strategies that these young people managed to align heightened aspirations to the often incompatible realities of their present-day lives in Kathmandu. In this way, they could develop a sense of themselves as competent people and maintained a generally positive outlook on life. But because their efforts of 'doing good' were much more low-key than dominant depictions of youth suggest, the contributions these young people made to the wider social good were largely overlooked in public debates about the role of educated youth in Nepali society (Chapter Six). Through an in-depth analysis of young people's time-space-strategies and their current position within existing socio-spatial hierarchies, this thesis develops an understanding of young people's expressions of agency in such a way as to move beyond restrictive stereotypes and to connect with geographical work on the politics of aspiration and the significance of spatial (im)mobility for people's life chances.

CHAPTER ONE

Moving from present to future

Theorising youth and social change

The truism that 'youth are the future' captures very well an assumption that underlies much of the research conducted in the field of youth studies. Young people's lives are commonly perceived as critical sites through which others may gain an understanding of what the future holds (Cole and Durham 2008: 3–4). Because young people are seen to be still in the process of making their place in society, and of exploring and experimenting with different identities and options, they are thought to serve as a catalyst for social change (e.g. Arnett 2000; Turner 1987). It is through the collective decisions and actions of the younger generation that a new and different future seems to become possible. This rather hopeful conception of youth agency nevertheless directly links to public concerns about the apparent inability of young people to resolve the indeterminacies and difficulties they confront in the present. In times of political and economic crises particularly, young people often struggle to establish themselves within their respective societies and are left with a sense of being trapped in-between confirmed social statuses. If youth are taken to embody the future, the problems faced by this specific subgroup of society are essentially tantamount to the dismantling of the widespread hope for future progress (Weiss 2004).

In this chapter I locate my research within the scholarly debate on the role of youth in processes of social change. More specifically, I bring together different strands of research on youth, aspiration, and mobility to illustrate important changes in the ways in which social scientists have thought about and, increasingly, have also worked with young people in the twentieth and the twenty-first century. At the same time, I show that researchers have approached questions about young people's practices and future orientations from a rather narrow perspective. Most scholars contributing to the field of youth studies have primarily studied instances in which young people are involved in acts of resistance or the creation of value, often in response to situations of adversity. Existing theorisations of young people's agency therefore tend to reproduce rather than scrutinise pervasive visions of youth as agents of social change and as a source of hope for a better

future. In order to supplement this work and provide a new perspective, I emphasise the varied nature of youth agency. In particular, I want to remain attentive to ideas and strategies which may be less expected based on dominant discourses on youth. In this way, I aim to unpack the complexity of the concept of the agency of young people.

I start with a review of existing conceptualisations of the role of youth in wider society. This body of literature has set the foundations for the increasingly interdisciplinary field of youth studies in which I ground my own enquiry. I then introduce the concept of 'vital conjunctures', which I found to be a useful way to develop multiple understandings of how young people try to map out potential educational and occupational pathways in an attempt to move towards a better future life. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of 'aspiration' and specifically of how a future-oriented approach to young people's practices can reveal much about the structural constraints and social influences that shape their lives. Lastly, I outline my conceptual understanding of mobility and show how young people's spatial practices relate to the formation of youth identities and how young people's (im)mobilities may affect wider society. This review of different strands of literature on youth, aspiration, and mobility establishes the theoretical foundations for my empirical analysis of young people's time-space-strategies in the context of urban Nepal.

Young people's agency

The social category of youth tends to be closely tied up with the idea that young people play a special role in processes of social change. Young people are generally thought to be particularly energetic and versatile, and hence quick to adapt to new environments and proactive in rethinking the existing system. In both scholarly and public debates, youth is commonly looked at as being uniquely endowed with the capacity to resist dominant pressures and to negotiate situations of difficulty in a creative manner. Such characterisations of youth agency underpin the assertion that the future of society lies in the hands of the younger generation (Cole and Durham 2008). This vision of youth as agents of social change has fuelled scholarly interest in young people's lives and in turn have resulted in a rapid expansion of the field of youth studies (e.g. Bucholtz 2002; James 1990). The principal aim of my study is to critically scrutinise pervasive notions of youth agency and in so doing to contribute to the ongoing and interdisciplinary debate about the social implications of young people's collective actions.

The foundations of existing theorisations of youth agency can be traced back at least as far as the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Hall 1904). Particularly influential in this context has been the work of Karl Mannheim (1952 [1923]). In an essay published in

1923, Mannheim presented a sociological analysis of the role of the younger generation in processes of social and cultural change. He specifically drew out the problems and the advantages of generational shifts. Mannheim emphasised that each generation approaches and assimilates into their socio-historical environment anew. That is, they come into a 'fresh contact' (ibid.: 293) with the shared cultural material. As long as the norms and habits passed on by the older to the younger generation function satisfactorily, the younger generation tends to internalise these ideas unwittingly. However, at times when the established value-system is no longer reconcilable with the new situation, the younger generation is likely to critically review the cultural heritage. On the one hand, this means that in the process of transmitting established social norms and cultural beliefs from one generation to the next some of the knowledge of previous generations gets lost. On the other hand, changes in how different generations approach their social and cultural heritage are essential for a society to adjust to new structural conditions. Mannheim (1952 [1923]: 294) explicitly writes: "The continuous emergence of new human beings [...] alone makes a fresh selection possible when it becomes necessary; it facilitates re-evaluation of our inventory and teaches us both to forget that which is no longer useful and to covet that which has yet to be won."

The idea that young people's agency emerges out of situations of friction and apprehension also resonates with Victor Turner's (1969, 1974) description of young people as liminal subjects. In anthropological thought liminality refers to the temporary state of being situated in-between confirmed social statuses; a position which raises uncertainty but also exempts from social restrictions (see also van Gennep 1960 [1909]). In the liminal phase of youth, individuals are therefore seen to be uniquely poised to be highly inventive and to rethink established social norms as they are in the process of remarking their place in society. These early works signified a departure from previous psychobiological research into youth. Young people's experiences and practices are no longer reduced to a developmental phase in the life course between childhood and adulthood but are analysed in relation to complex processes of social change and reproduction. This conceptual move inspired researchers from across the social sciences to pay more attention to the agency of young people.

A central theme of this scholarship on young people's agency is the significance of youth subcultures as critical sites for processes of social and cultural production. Particularly influential in this respect has been the work of researchers associated with the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham in the 1970s and 1980s. CCCS scholars contributing to a collection of working papers titled *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall and Jefferson 1976) have argued that youth subcultures emerge within and, in fact, against the power relations around which social life is

organised. With elements of Marxism forming the central theoretical pillar of a series of studies produced at the CCCS, deviance – whether in terms of certain activities, styles, or use of specific spaces – was seen as a way by which young people set themselves apart from the dominant culture and hence could challenge the status quo. Rather than viewing youth solely as future adults, the work of CCCS scholars made evident that young people produce something on their own that is of value for them, if not in the long term, then at least at the time. Empirically, the studies by CCCS scholars remained exclusively focused on young people's lives in post-World War II Britain. In terms of their theoretical contributions, however, the work of CCCS scholars became a major point of reference for youth studies, directing attention to acts of rebellion and resistance, along with creativity, as hallmarks of young people's agency.

The assertion that young people's actions need to be understood as active efforts to advertise their individuality and to gain more independence is further underpinned by an extensive body of literature on young people's lives in the late twentieth and the twenty-first century (e.g. Bynner, Chisholm, and Furlong 1997; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Heinz 1987, 2003; Roberts, Clark, and Wallace 1994; Shanahan 2000; see also Beck 1992 [1986]). The burgeoning interest in youth research was spurred by public concerns over growing levels of instability and uncertainty regarding young people's transition from school to work. As a result of the economic recession in the 1980s in Europe and North America, youth unemployment rates increased significantly. At the same time, the expansion of the service industry raised expectations for educational qualifications in those countries. On the one hand, these changes in the education and labour market allowed some young people, and especially young women, to seize on a range of new opportunities that had been largely unavailable to their parents. 'Standard biographies' specific to a person's gender and class were seen to be replaced by 'choice biographies' (e.g. du Bois-Reymond 1998; Brannen and Nilsen 2002). However, young men from a working-class background seemed to lose out on these developments. Linda McDowell (2003), for example, found that the machismo and resistance associated with male working-class culture, alongside a fairly poor education, put working-class young men at a disadvantage in the changing labour market of Northern England. McDowell moves on to argue that young men did not despair despite the fact that they failed to upgrade their skills and were excluded from more well-paid jobs. Rather these young men maintained a strong dedication to work hard, which in turn enabled them to obtain relatively stable forms of employment and to build committed relationships. Taken together, these studies imply that young people's efforts to achieve independence have become more complicated, as young people can no longer rely on previously well-established pathways. Instead, they are increasingly required to construct their own routes through formal

education and into the labour market, thereby drawing from a wider set of opportunities – whether by choice or not.

Human geographers and social anthropologists have further advanced this debate by contributing insights into young people's lives in other parts of the world. These studies establish that lingering political or economic crises amplify young people's struggle to map out potential future pathways. In places as diverse as Ethiopia (Mains 2012), Senegal (Ralph 2008), Papa New Guinea (Demerath 2003), and India (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008), the expansion of modern education systems coupled with a stagnant labour market has left a large number of young people without any tangible prospects for an adequate employment that would allow them to build a financially secure future. Political regulations sometimes exacerbate the struggle young people face. In the case of Rwanda, for example, the government launched a housing reform which significantly complicated young people's efforts to build a house in proximity to their rural home communities; a life achievement which is closely tied up with local notions of proper manhood (Sommers 2012). In a similar vein, young people in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, felt that social adulthood was beyond their grasp as they struggled to accumulate the resources necessary to move out of their parents' homes (Hansen 2005).

Whilst these studies tend to focus on male youth, the problems they outline have direct implications for young women. In many societies in Africa and South Asia, young men's financial independence is thought to be a prerequisite for obtaining a socially acceptable marriage, having children in that marriage, and providing for the family (e.g. Lukose 2010; Masquelier 2005). For young women it is particularly important to secure a favourable marriage arrangement and attain motherhood because young women are likely to have even fewer opportunities to obtain other social markers of seniority, in the form of higher levels of education, professional employment, or positions of public responsibility (Stambach 2000). However, as young people's private lives become enmeshed in the uncertainties arising from daunting economic prospects and political instability, it seems impossible for young men and women alike to foresee whether and when they will be able to gain recognition as full adults. It therefore has been argued that societies in the global South are faced with the imminent danger of producing 'an entire generation of failed adults' which is vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation by political forces, including militant and criminal groups (Sommers 2012: 193; see also Dore 1976).

Other scholars working with young people in the global South have mitigated such ominous depictions of youth, arguing that young people may respond to unpromising circumstances in a creative and not in a destructive manner. There is now plenty of evidence to suggest that unemployed young men engage in strategic forms of waiting in order to mediate the severe lack of job opportunities (Jeffrey 2010b; Mains 2012; Newell

2012; Ralph 2008). Other studies imply that young people's resourcefulness sometimes simply resides in their ability to survive. This point emerges forcefully from Kate Swanson's (2010) account of young beggars in Ecuador. Swanson describes how young people have responded to the decline of the rural economy by migrating to the country's largest city to beg. Through begging these young people are able to build supportive social networks and to accumulate sufficient money to finance their schooling. Hannah Hoechner (2011) makes a parallel observation in her study of Qur'anic students in Nigeria. She shows that traditional Islamic education in combination with begging or menial work in urban areas constitutes an important coping strategy for the sons of poor rural families and enables these young men to deflect attention from the fact that they are socially excluded. The image produced by such accounts is one in which young people are seen to be highly capable of appropriating dominant structures and of negotiating situations of adversity.

Studies of youth in Nepal largely resonate with this broader debate about youth agency, with the country's younger population often being ascribed the role of society's 'change agents'. In a recent study of Nepali student politics, Amanda Snellinger (2005, 2009, 2010) illustrates well that youth activism is a key theme in the discourses and programmes of various, often competing, political forces, which seek to mobilise the country's young population for their own benefits. Against the backdrop of the politically tumultuous period between 2003 and 2008, Snellinger argues that youth came to be conceived of as a liminal stage. The Nepali politicians she spoke with explained that young people's "hopes are based in tradition and aspirations of the previous generations but their flexible perspective allows them to conceive possibilities their parents did not" (Snellinger 2005: 20). In line with this political conception of youth, the National Youth Policy 2010 depicts youth as a 'change driving force' with the capacity to realise the political, economic, and social future ideals which to date remain unaccomplished (MoYS 2010).

This vision of youth as a source of hope for future change also resonates with Mark Liechty's (2003: 246) description of Kathmandu's youth as the 'vanguard' of the middle-class project to construct a 'modern' future. Liechty conducted his ethnographic research in the early 1990s, when a new propertied class started to emerge in Nepal's capital city as a result of large-scale economic, political, and social transformations. These developments had direct implications for the younger population: young people's lives increasingly evolved around new social institutions – colleges, offices, clubs, shopping malls – which brought together peers from both genders and from different caste and ethnic origins. In this context, Liechty argues that "a new 'in-between' domain of 'youth' [...] opens up at the intersection of new patterns of education, labor, consumption and class formation"

(ibid.: 243). Against the backdrop of the structural changes transforming the country's educational and economic landscape, the English term 'youth' and the Nepali equivalent '*yuba*' became less associated with the transition to adulthood than with an entirely new social category, constituting an important site for a new and different future (Liechty 2003; see also Snellinger 2013).

In practice, however, young people in Nepal seem to be mostly waiting for change to happen – be it on a personal, political, or social level (Liechty 2003; Snellinger 2009, 2010). For the established elite and the new middle class investing into the offspring's education has come to be a question of social prestige. From the perspective of the young people themselves, however, the class-specific privilege of prolonging their education in the absence of adequate job opportunities has turned into a social dilemma. Specific markers of adulthood, such as a salaried employment and, in extension to this, a suitable marriage arrangement, are increasingly hard to achieve. Liechty (2003: 211) therefore concludes that a growing number of young Nepalis are trapped 'in a kind of limbo' as they try to fulfil the hopes and dreams of middle-class families, yet without much success. A similar sense of deferment is also evident in the definitions of youth used in Nepali politics. Politicians, some of them aged 40 and above, have continued to act as 'youth leaders' because they are still waiting their turn to be promoted to the higher ranks of the party hierarchy (Snellinger 2009). Researchers working with young people in Nepal therefore broadly agree that young Nepalis are in situations of 'radical uncertainty' (Madsen and Carney 2011), as youth has emerged to be primarily a holding category for a surplus of 'adults-in-waiting' (Snellinger 2009).

The studies I have reviewed so far not only illustrate that the literature on youth agency has expanded enormously during the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. They also epitomise the advances made in the way in which social scientists think about as well as work with young people. Perhaps most importantly, youth researchers have moved beyond narrow theories of socialisation by emphasising that young people are social agents in their own right (e.g. Holloway and Valentine 2000b; James et al. 1998). This means that young people are no longer conceived of as passive recipients of the norms and values that adults try to pass onto them. Rather, due attention is now being paid to the perceptions of young people themselves and to the ways in which young people act upon the multitude of structuring forces and social influences that shape their lives. This conceptual move also reflects in calls for an active involvement of young people in research activities and other social processes, more generally (e.g. Barker et al. 2009; Matthews, Limb, and Taylor 1999).

This significant progress notwithstanding, the visions of agency that emerge from the extensive body of literature on youth produced over the course of the past century

tend to cluster around notions of youth as innovatively resourceful and inevitably sources of hope. There is above all a consistent concern to show how young people negotiate situations of uncertainty and adversity. In particular, attention is being directed to instances in which young people stimulate social change by breaking with established habits and beliefs and by creating new ideas and values (Ahearn 2001b; Bucholtz 2002). Youth agency is therefore commonly understood as an oppositional and inventive capacity which enables young people to assert their independence against dominant social pressures and cultural hegemonies. In some cases, theorisations of youth agency can be traced back to the rise of romanticism in the nineteenth century, and particularly to the German romantic tradition of 'storm and stress' (France 2007; see also Hall 1904). Descriptions of youth as a period of 'storm and stress' suggest that young people go through a time of rupture and crisis as they transcend childhood identities and start to build their own future lives. Over the course of the twentieth century young people's personal growth has become increasingly linked to specific steps and achievements: completing schooling, securing a job, earning an income, and moving out of the parental home. It is commonly presumed that such accomplishments have to be achieved through an act of liberation from the familiar socio-spatial environment. From this perspective, young people's personal growth is intimately linked to social change (see Durham 2008).

Western-inspired approaches to youth agency which emphasise the liberation of the individual as a 'self' from structuring forces are ubiquitous both in academic writing as well as in policy discourses. However, for my work with young people in Nepal, such an understanding of youth agency is only partially useful for several reasons. First, a tight focus on individual agency draws attention away from differences in people's agency related to their social identities, including gender, caste/ ethnicity, and class. In a study of poor and lower middle-class youth in Madagascar, Jennifer Cole (2004) clearly shows that young women and young men negotiate economic scarcity differently. Whilst young women could earn some money by engaging in sexual relationships with foreign visitors, young men were often left to survive through petty crime. These dynamics led to a change in local gender roles, wherein young men became increasingly reliant on their female partners and young women gained in authority as the main breadwinners. Cole's study illustrates well that young people try to cope with economic difficulties based on the specific kind of agency bestowed on them by virtue of their gender identity. Jane Dyson's (2008) account of young people's involvement in lichen collection in a remote part of the Indian Himalayas is similarly helpful. Young men and especially those belonging to a lower caste worked particularly hard in the forest, as a good harvest enabled them to support their families financially. By contrast, upper-caste young women used the time in the forest also for 'fun activities'. These differences in young people's work practices relate to

gender norms imposed on them in more public spaces. Unlike young men, young women had few opportunities to have fun outside the forest, because in the presence of other members of the village community it would have been socially unacceptable for young women to play games or to fool around. Thus, Dyson's observations not only illustrate how gender and caste inequalities play out in young people's work practices but also highlight the spatial dimension of youth agency. In view of such findings, I suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the various ways in which young people may exercise their agency in different socio-spatial contexts as their practices are always shaped by social norms and expectations related to a person's gender, caste/ ethnicity, and class.

A second difficulty with pervasive conceptualisations of youth agency from the point of view of my interest in young people's lives in Nepal is that young people's actions are generally understood as efforts to achieve greater independence in order to demonstrate maturity. In many parts of the world, however, young people's maturity and agency is measured in terms of less rather than more independence. For example, research on young people's work routines in countries in the global South shows that young people's acceptance into adult society depends to a large extent on their ability to contribute fully to the maintenance of the household – be it in the form of domestic chores or in the form of paid labour outside the household (e.g. Magazine and Sánchez 2007; Reynolds 1991). Samantha Punch (2002) makes this point explicit in her study of adult-child relations in rural Bolivia. She shows that young people were expected to accept more responsibility for their family and community as they grew up. In view of such local notions of maturity, young people's involvement in the labour market cannot only be explained by financial needs, but also by their desire to fulfil the social obligations they have towards their kin. Other studies have further contributed to this debate by directing attention to the importance of friendship ties for young people. Based on research with middle-class young men in Bangalore, Nicholas Nisbett (2007) argues that unemployed young men were able to maintain a sense of middle-class status by sharing expensive consumer goods with their friends. In this sense, relationships with peers are seen to open up possibilities for young people to acquire a sense of agency (see also Dyson 2010; Willis 1977). In all these contexts, young people's actions are expressions of sociality. I therefore propose that it is necessary to critically examine the prevalent assumption according to which young people's agency resides in their active efforts to become more independent in order to raise their social status.

This point of criticism relates to a third shortcoming, which weaves through a large share of the literature on youth agency. Starting with the work of CCCS scholars, studies of youth have been mainly concerned with deviant forms of behaviour and young people's involvement in spectacular actions. The CCCS researchers were not unaware of this

limitation. In the theoretical part of their collaborative work, they note that "the great majority of [...] youth never enters a tight or coherent subculture at all" (Clarke et al. 1975: 16). Nevertheless, notions of rupture and crisis continue to be a central theme also in more recent studies of youth, especially though not exclusively of young people's lives in parts of Africa and Asia. Critics have therefore noted that most youth researchers seem to have lost from sight 'the more mundane dimensions of everyday life' for young people (Hansen 2005: 4; see also Cole 2010; Durham 2008). The majority of young people, however, remain firmly located in well-established social institutions – school, work, and family – that shape their daily lives, without necessarily questioning them. They are law-abiding, committed to doing well in school and at work, respectful of adults, and tightly connected to their families and friends (Ball, Macrae, and Maguire 2000: 93–104). Their behaviour therefore rarely raises any concerns about the future in which society is moving. Adults can feel reassured, because the offspring appear to be in agreement with the cultural values and norms which the older generation aims to pass on to them. Precisely because 'conformist' youth are presumed to primarily reproduce the status quo, they generally receive far less attention in both scholarly and public debates (e.g. Bucholtz 2002; Lave et al. 1992; Woodman 2013; Wulff 1995). Such interpretations, however, downplay the extent to which young people may exert their power not only by resisting against dominant pressures but also by abiding by established norms. Particularly instructive in this context is Deborah Durham's (2008) research with young people in Botswana. Durham found that the young people she worked with greatly valued connections with other family members, elders, and their home communities and actively sought to strengthen these ties. It was through their involvement in traditional social networks and their ability to listen, understand, and obey that young people learned how to 'get things done' (ibid.: 176), i.e. how to act effectively by exercising a measure of power. Durham therefore emphasises that youth researchers need to move beyond simply stating that young people have agency and, instead, need to examine more closely what kind of agency young people might have and how their agency relates them to others and to their society (ibid.: 153). Building on such critical contributions to the field of youth studies, I seek to develop a fuller understanding of young people's agency through my work with young people in urban Nepal. In particular, I aim to move beyond stereotypical ideas attached to youth by examining to what extent young people identify themselves with public discourses on the role of youth in Nepali society and with prevailing expectations about the younger population.

Vital conjunctures of youth

Central to the literature on youth agency are questions about young people's educational and occupational pathways. Related decisions and practices are often seen to be of major importance for people's chances of building a prosperous future life. Studies of young people's progression through the education system and into the labour market have effectively described the workings of various forces of socialisation, including the family, the school, the media, and the state to name a few (e.g. Coleman 1973; James et al. 1998). As a result, social scientists now broadly agree that the category of 'youth' needs to be understood as a social construction, because young people's lives are always shaped by multiple dominant pressures and recursive interventions by adults (e.g. Barker et al. 2009; Holloway and Valentine 2000b). Since the twentieth century, Euro-American models of how individuals should mature by completing formal schooling and by entering the labour market thereafter have become manifested in people's minds across the world (Cole and Durham 2008: 5–6; Ruddick 2003). In recent years, however, the concept of youth transitions has attracted much criticism as it assimilates young people's development to a unilinear progression through specific stages and implies that there exists a universal, normative set of behaviours and experiences through which individuals are integrated into adult society (e.g. Jeffrey 2010a; Wyn and Woodman 2006, 2007). Consequently, any sort of deviance from this transitional process – whether because of young people's own actions or because of conditions beyond their control – is likely to be interpreted as a sign of a young person's inability to construct a successful future life. Whilst efforts have been made to account for non-linear transitions (e.g. Hörschelmann 2011; Roberts 2007; Valentine 2003), the focus of transition literature remains on the acquisition of adulthood, i.e. the end point. By contrast, I suggest that a thorough understanding of the complex and often uneven ways in which young people try to construct a future necessitates a shift in focus to the actual process of becoming. In my own analysis of the educational and occupational situations of young Nepalis, I therefore strive to adopt a contextually based approach which traces social patterns at the micro-level and hence allows me to capture heterogeneities in young people's present-day practices and in their narratives about their potential future lives.

Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's (2002) theory of 'vital conjunctures' promises to be particularly useful for this purpose. Drawing from her empirical research in Cameroon, Johnson-Hanks problematises the presumed linearity and universality of young people's life trajectories. She demonstrates that young Beti women experienced changes in their social standing linked to marriage, motherhood, employment or formal education at different ages. Furthermore, these potentially life-changing experiences did not occur in a predictable order but sometimes took place in parallel to each other, or not at all. Johnson-

Hanks therefore proposes a theory of 'vital conjunctures'. The term 'conjuncture' derives from the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and refers to relatively short-term conditions that manifest social structure and shape the range of possible actions. With reference to young people's lives, Johnson-Hanks suggests that particular attention needs to be paid to sites of vital conjunctures, when structuring elements combine in ways which make it more likely that change will happen. Such an approach takes into account the fact that a multitude of institutions forcefully shape young people's present experiences and their ideas about potential future pathways, but it also recognises that over time new opportunities may open up in an often unpredictable manner, and that existing future orientations consequently may be re-evaluated, changed, and even reversed. Variations in young people's life experiences, then, are no longer perceived as problematic, but in fact are to be expected and thus are more likely to be the focus of analysis (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 878).

With the concept of 'vital conjunctures', Johnson-Hanks theoretically departs from other models which focus on specific 'turning points' (Mandelbaum 1973) or 'critical moments' (Thomson et al. 2002) around and through which people's lives evolve. She emphasises that, as opposed to specific key events, vital conjunctures are crucial periods in people's lives which can have multiple outcomes over different time frames. Johnson-Hanks explains this idea using the following example:

> Let us return now to our young man looking toward college and adult life. Instead of a liminal moment between clear and coherent stages, I suggest that his situation is a vital conjuncture. His future is largely open – up for grabs – and the alternatives that he imagines matter. The temporal coordination that he faces is the partially realized project of the social institutions that frame his alternatives, which make certain aspirations plausible, possible, or almost unthinkable. (Johnson-Hanks 2002: 878)

Such a dual focus on aspirations and institutions enables a perspective towards young people's life experiences that attends to how and why their status and perceptions may change over time as they spend extensive periods in the formal education system and the labour market. In this way, the concept of vital conjunctures helps to overcome the narrow focus of transition models which tend to be fixated on the end point of acquiring adult status. A systematic exploration of the vital conjunctures occupied by young people instead allows paying due attention to the process of 'becoming somebody' and to the whole range of potential futures under debate. Building on Johnson-Hanks's theoretical work, therefore, helps me to take better account of the multiple ways in which young people may actively reassess their own positioning and future options as they encounter persisting constraints and get exposed to new ideas and influences. Adopting a more contextually sensitive perspective, furthermore, allows me to remain attentive to changes in young people's future strategies which may be less expected based on prevalent

discourses and my own assumptions. By recognising that young people may approach the future in various ways, I suggest that it becomes possible to move away from a language of crisis and to prise open the social category of youth.

In order to do so, however, I suggest that it is necessary to explore in more depth in which situations young people are more likely to rethink and perhaps change their perceptions of self and others and, in extension to this, their own future horizons. Johnson-Hanks (2002: 872) emphasises that "the social analysis of a set of vital conjunctures rests on the systematic comparison of the kinds of futures the actors imagine when confronted with specific challenges". The concept of 'aspiration' therefore constitutes the fulcrum of an analysis of sites of vital conjunctures. Even so, Johnson-Hanks does not further specify what the concept of aspiration entails. In order to address this shortcoming, I strive to explore more fully which aspirations young people attach to their educational and occupational situations and which social influences shape their aspirations.

Moreover, I propose that a unilateral focus on temporalities risks underplaying the spatial nature of vital conjunctures. Johnson-Hanks convincingly develops the temporal dimension of the concept. She explains in detail that vital conjunctures have duration, are variable not only in pacing but also in order and synchronisation. Similar to the concept of youth transitions, Johnson-Hanks's theory of vital conjunctures therefore mainly accounts for how young people develop over time. But scholars of geography and migration studies have repeatedly shown that movements across space are equally significant for people's social status and can alter their future life chances. In a paper on the geography of children and young people, Gill Valentine (2003: 38) explicitly notes that "while children aged 5-16 should be at school, young people aged 16–25 may be at school, college or university, other forms of vocational training, in paid work, unemployed, doing voluntary work, travelling and so on. They experience far fewer spatial restrictions than their younger peers". In line with Valentine's argument, I propose that questions about spatial mobility and immobility are a key concern for people occupying vital conjunctures of youth. A focus on young people's time-space-strategies can therefore further advance our understanding of how young people experience and navigate sites of vital conjunctures.

The politics of aspirations

The concept of 'aspiration' has gained currency in scholarly and public debates about processes of social reproduction. In his now classic book *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argues that subordinate groups tend to internalise certain limits of their social position. This can mean that people blame themselves for failing to succeed even in situations when success was very unlikely in the first place because of structural

constraints beyond the individual's control. Often, however, less privileged members of society do not even aim for certain achievements that upper-status groups may take for granted, such as admission to university or a white-collar job. Rather, they develop a sense of their social limits and downscale their own future aspirations. Bourdieu refers to this internalisation of comparatively low dispositions towards the future as 'the choice of the necessary'.

Expanding on this rationale, Arjun Appadurai (2004) contends that strengthening people's 'capacity to aspire' can help them to improve their lives and in turn can spur social transformation at a larger scale. Appadurai conceptualises the capacity to aspire as a future-oriented form of human agency. He explicitly builds on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) and other scholars who have contributed to a theory of practice. Practice theorists have sought to overcome the structure/ agency opposition by arguing that human actions and social structures are dialectically related and mutually reinforcing. Agency then never exists outside the social structure, but rather emerges from the multitude of social interactions in which people are enmeshed (e.g. Ortner 2006). Appadurai (2004: 67) accounts for this dialectic by emphasising that "aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norm [...] They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life". However, he specifically conceives of agency not only in relation to traditional values and established habits, but also as taking the form of targets, goals, future plans, hopes; in sum, aspirations.

In particular, Appadurai emphasises that what people believe is possible for them to achieve in the future strongly influences their actions and decisions in the present. However, in order to map out potential routes to future success, information about possible destinations, shortcuts, blockages, preferable paths and alternative ways is required. Such information is not equally available to different members of society. In line with Bourdieu, Appadurai (2004: 67–68) holds that more privileged groups are more likely to have a better understanding of a wider range of possibilities, because they can resort to previous experiences of success, and have sufficient resources to experiment with their ideas. Poorer members, in contrast, often struggle to construct a sufficiently detailed map to enable them to reach desired future destinations. Drawing from his ethnographical material about an alliance of slum dwellers in Mumbai, Appadurai shows that this grassroots organisation provided a platform by which the urban poor could discuss and present their ideas, with the result that they were better able to identify a range of future possibilities as well as the challenges they had to tackle in order to reach their goals (Appadurai 2004: 71–80). In this way, the urban poor could advance their own agendas and become less reliant on more powerful actors, such as government authorities, private contractors, and NGOs. Appadurai therefore concludes that the capacity to both set

targets for the future as well as to navigate a way towards them provides a basis for upward social mobility.

The idea of raising people's aspirations in order to narrow the social gap is also reflected in discourses on policies for young people in various parts of the world. Studies in the context of the UK imply that having low aspirations for higher education and a profitable career is thought to be a deficit, which hinders children from socially marginalised or low-income families to improve their lives (Brown 2011; Crozier 2009; Raco 2009). Politics of aspiration-building are therefore advocated as a way forward to raise standards of living in deprived areas and communities. In a similar vein, efforts to expand the formal education sector in countries in the global South are commonly accompanied by public discourses on poverty reduction, economic prosperity, and social equity (e.g. Brock 2011; Little and Lewin 2011; Meinert 2009). Consequently, many young people and their families aspire to obtain educational credentials, primarily because they have come to believe that higher education offers a route to professional employment and upward mobility (e.g. Dore 1976; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Mains 2012).

Research into the formation of young people's aspirations and potential implications for their future life chances, however, suggests that the rhetoric of hope and opportunity can be problematic. One set of studies specifically deals with the question about how young people's aspirations are shaped in social interaction and, in this context, draws attention to possible counterforces that may delimit young people's horizons of opportunity. One of the earlier accounts on this topic is a study by Burton Clark (1960) who explored how institutionalised processes shaped the educational and occupational aspirations of young people studying at junior colleges in the US. He found that students went through a sequence of procedures, including class assessments and career counselling, which led them to lower and redefine their future ambitions. Aspirations initially promoted by public discourses about equal opportunities were gently let down or 'cooled out' once students entered the higher education institution. Clark (1960: 576) concluded that "the general result of cooling-out processes is that society can continue to encourage maximum effort without major disturbance from unfulfilled promises and expectations" (see also Goffman 1952).

More recent studies, however, indicate that socially instilled aspirations are often no longer effectively 'cooled out'. Based on his research with unemployed young men in Northern India, Craig Jeffrey (2010b) shows that young men continued to uphold the hope of securing a respectable post as a civil servant, despite being acutely aware that the extraordinary number of applicants far exceeded the very few vacancies available in the government sector. Nevertheless, these young people further nurtured their career plans and continued accumulating additional educational credentials in the belief that the 'right'

combination of qualifications would eventually enable them to realise their professional ambitions. Their inability to realise their aspirations, however, left these young men with a sense of disappointment, frustration, and loss.

Such anxieties are further exacerbated when young people find themselves confronted with inconsistent expectations as regards their potential futures. The work of Sarah H. Smith (2013) is particularly illustrative in this context. Based on her research in the disputed territories in India's Jammu and Kashmir State, Smith shows that young people often found themselves torn between social expectations of modernity and the need to conform to traditional notions of social respectability. On the one hand, parents wanted their children to benefit from the new educational facilities in the urban centres which had previously remained largely inaccessible. On the other hand, sending the offspring to the city seemed to bear the risk of compromising religious identity as a result of potentially wayward romantic liaisons and lack of supervision. Parents' attempts to guide their children towards a desired 'modern' future and, simultaneously, to impose their parental authority on young people's mobility put the young generation in a state of uncertainty and disorientation or, in Smith's words, a 'generational vertigo'.

These studies show that a host of social and institutional actors, such as parents, peers, education professionals, mass media, and policymakers, try to influence young people in their attempts to move towards a desirable future. Through this kind of forward projection of young people's lives and behaviours others try to develop a sense of what the future may hold. From the perspective of the younger generation, however, it is difficult to negotiate these diverse and often incompatible visions of potential futures. Consequently, youth appears to be particularly affected by the high levels of uncertainty inherent in the future and even more so when the futures they are encouraged to envision stand in stark contrast with the realities of their present-day lives. The gap that exists between encouragements to achieve and actual chance of realising achievement is a problematic one, as it tends to leave individuals with a sense of disappointment and failure. Some scholars have even warned that such heightened levels of frustration amongst the younger population bear the risk of social unrest (e.g. Dore 1976; Sommers 2012).

Discrepancies between young people's aspirations and their chances of realising these aspirations prompt further questions about the specific content and nature of socially instilled future orientations. Sarah Holloway and Helena Pimlott-Wilson (2011), for example, raise the question about what defines parental aspirations for their children as low. In interviews with education practitioners in the UK, it became apparent that efforts to widen children's horizons of opportunity largely evolved around the valorisation of academic education and a professional career. However, setting such norms about the kind of aspirations perceived to be 'appropriate' generally neglects alternative ideas of

happiness and well-being and even downgrades certain other achievements in life, such as founding a family and taking responsibility as a parent. More importantly, judgements about what constitutes 'appropriate' future aspirations tend to be made against established middle-class standards (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; see also Raco 2009). Nitya Rao's (2010) study of young people's educational and occupational aspirations in a rural community in Eastern India is similarly compelling. Her observations complicate developmental discourses proclaiming that hopes for a greater degree of personal and financial autonomy are the reasons behind the increase in girls' enrolment rates. However, most Hindu parents are willing to invest in their daughters' education, not because they want their daughters to become more self-reliant, but because upper-status men increasingly prefer their wives to be well educated (see also Donner 2005). These studies indicate that young people's aspirations may not necessarily provide a potential map for upward social mobility, but may as well reflect and reinforce established social hierarchies of class, gender, and caste/ ethnicity.

In order to avoid reproducing normative discourses about young people's potential futures in academia, attempts have been made to call more attention to young people' own articulations of hope (e.g. Bishop and Willis 2014; Pain et al. 2010). By contrasting representations of childhood and hope in policy reports with young people's own narratives, Peter Kraftl (2008) has developed a particularly nuanced and politically aware understanding of young people's modes of hoping. Kraftl found that policymakers and charities working on behalf of children intimately link childhood to notions of hope and futurity in an often universalising and simplistic manner. In comparison, children's ways of hoping are far less spectacular than such adult-constructed representations suggest. Kraftl (2008: 88) further specifies that "hope was manifested in very small steps, relatively *modest* coping mechanisms and minute changes in individuals' attitudes to life. Through these, diverse fragments of hope may be allowed to foment, small opportunities may begin to present themselves" [emphasis in the original]. In order to interrogate more modest forms of hoping, Kraftl suggests that we should not simply replace 'high-profile' representations of childhood and hope with more 'low-key' forms of hoping. Rather, research into young people's future orientations needs to critically review dominant discourses about youth and futurity by developing a reinvigorated understanding of how hope is figured through young people's everyday practices and routines.

To summarise, the idea of raising people's aspirations to help them improve their lives has generated considerable controversy. I take from Appadurai's (2004) theoretical work that an exploration of young people's future horizons can reveal much about why young people try to seize on particular opportunities in the present. By considering which new information and additional experiences they may gather over time and across space,

it also becomes possible to understand why some future plans become more concretised, while others may need to be revised or dropped altogether. A future-oriented approach to young people's behaviours and actions therefore can provide new insights into how young people navigate their social spaces (Appadurai 2004: 84). However, an uncritical emphasis on young people's capacity to plan for alternative futures and to identify ways to move towards them runs the risk of reproducing prevailing notions of youth as 'change agents' and of downplaying the extent to which young people's lives are deeply embedded within established social structures. Existing research on the formation of young people's aspirations points towards a whole range of possible counterforces which may delimit young people's aspirations or may severely complicate the realisation of their aspirations. Consequently, I hold that young people's chances of realising socially instilled future ideals are not solely a matter of their capacity to aspire, but also need to be understood within the context of wider social, economic and political circumstances. In this thesis, I therefore look more closely at both the content of young people's aspirations and the extent to which their aspirations correspond to their social and economic opportunities. Moreover, I am interested to find out to what extent young people identify with dominant discourses on the role of youth in future society. In so doing, I strive to remain critical of the politics involved in the formation of young people's aspirations and attentive to alternative and perhaps more subtle ways of figuring the future.

Young people's (im)mobilities

Movement has been the subject of investigation throughout the history of the discipline of geography and related subfields, especially migration studies. Researchers contributing to this literature have effectively described certain patterns of human mobility, such as international versus internal migration, skilled versus unskilled migration, or temporary versus permanent migration. In this way, they have identified a range of motivations for people to migrate and have disclosed diverse experiences of migrants at either end of the relocation process. More importantly, migration experts have shown that human mobility has come to play a vital role in reshaping societies and politics around the world (e.g. Castles and Miller 2009). It appears to be increasingly necessary for people to move in order to earn a living, to find a safe place to stay, to obtain an education, and to reunite with family and friends. In this sense, mobility is seen to constitute an essential resource for people to make a living and for the functioning of society, more generally. As a result, questions about the implications of the growing magnitude and significance of human mobility for individual actors and for society at large have gained in urgency in social science research.

In response, researchers from across the social sciences have called for a 'new mobilities paradigm'. In particular, it has been argued that there is a need to move beyond primarily documenting how human mobility has intensified both in pace and in scope. More importantly, scholars need to examine how social life can be re-thought through mobility rather than stasis and structure (see Sheller and Urry 2006). Recent contributions to mobilities research seek to do so by unpacking the complex ways in which different forms of mobility are interrelated to one another and connected across different scales. Due to technological innovations and global trade relations, foreign places and cultural plurality have become an integral part of people's everyday life across the world (e.g. Salazar 2011). Even those individuals who are physically settled can now explore distant places by travelling through the virtual space. Consequently, people's mobility practices are no longer only a matter of physical movement per se but need to be understood within the context of a variety of things moving – be it other people, ideas, or objects. Within the mobilities paradigm, scholars therefore seek to foreground mobility as a geographical fact that lies at the centre of the micro-geographies of everyday life (Cresswell 2010).

By making mobility the focal point of analysis, mobilities research theoretically departs from existing studies of human mobility. Previously, research into people's movements has been primarily concerned with pre- and post-migration experiences, i.e. with the end points of the migration process. Within the mobilities paradigm, by contrast, movement is no longer taken for granted as a connection between two locations but constitutes the very subject of enquiry. Re-approaching mobility in this way has several outcomes, as Tim Cresswell (2006: 265) specifies:

> "In this world it is important to understand that mobility is more than about just getting from A to B. It is about the contested world of meaning and power. It is about mobilities rubbing up against each other and causing friction. It is about a new hierarchy based on the ways we move and the meanings these movements have been given."

As emphasised by Cresswell (2006), mobility is rarely a neutral act but always filled with meaning. Mobility has no pre-existing significance in and of itself; it is not essentially good or bad. Rather, mobility is read and interpreted against established societal norms and value systems, which may or may not be specific to a particular place and a particular time. Furthermore, the meanings given to mobility are intimately connected to the different ways in which people practise, experience, and embody mobility. Cresswell, therefore, contends that it is essential for mobilities scholars to attend to the specific context in which mobility takes place and to the distinct ways in which social actors are positioned in relation to flows and interconnections. Without due attention to the social and experiential dimensions of mobility, Cresswell argues, academic work would ignore

that mobility is of political significance in contemporary societies, and hence would fail to capture the complex relationship between spatial mobility and social mobility.

The idea that there is more to mobility than mere movement also resonates with Doreen Massey's (1993) formulation of a 'power-geometry'. Massey is particularly critical of the prevalent impression that, as long as people have sufficient money, they can take equal advantage of mobility in contemporary societies. By contrast, she holds that mobilities are unevenly experienced in relation to a whole range of markers of social difference, including gender, age, class, ethnicity, nationality, and geographical origin. Accordingly, differences in people's access to certain kinds and qualities of mobility tend to reflect already existing social inequalities and hierarchies. Massey moves on to argue that those individuals or social groups with better access to mobility may use their mobility to reinforce and improve their social standing. She writes: "It is not simply a question of unequal distribution, that some people move more than others, some have more control than others. It is that the mobility and control of some groups can actively weaken other people" (Massey 1993: 62). Thus, the key point of Massey's argument about the 'power-geometry' inherent in mobility is much more than the recognition that mobility is socially differentiated. Rather, she emphasises that mobilities can reproduce existing inequalities and may even lead to new forms of social differentiation.

Taken together, such interventions imply that an increase in mobilities does not displace or replace immobilities. As other key contributors to mobilities research assert, "there is no linear increase in fluidity without extensive systems of immobility" (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006: 3). Accordingly, mobility and immobility must not be thought of as mutually exclusive; on the contrary, the mobility of some individuals is inevitably linked to the immobility of others. To some extent, the relationship between mobility and immobility is a question of who initiates and controls mobility and who is controlled or even imprisoned by it (see Massey 1993). But research has also shown that some individuals strategically choose to remain rooted in place in order to facilitate and sustain the mobilities of others. The work of migration experts is particularly instructive in this context, as it shows that non-movers play an active role in migration processes (e.g. Cohen and Sirkeci 2011: 87–96; Goldin, Cameron, and Balarajan 2011: 179–193). Those who stay at home serve as an important connection that anchors and secures the migrant. Sometimes non-movers even initiate mobility practices by providing the financial means required by others to become spatially mobile in the first place. Such accounts challenge pervasive associations based on which immobility increasingly acquires the connotation of passiveness, failure, backwardness, and social exclusion and urge for further in-depth investigations into the relationship between mobilities and immobilities.

Geographical work on children and youth reveals that questions about spatial mobility and immobility are a key concern especially for young people (e.g. Barker et al. 2009; Geisen 2010; Holloway and Jöns 2012; Smith, Rérat, and Sage 2014). Of particular relevance in this context are studies concerned with the growing significance of spatial mobilities for young people's learning and education. As the common expression 'going away to uni' exemplifies, the association between young people's spatial mobility and higher levels of education has become deeply manifested in the social consciousness (Holdsworth 2009). More recently, however, the presumed connection between enhanced levels of spatial mobility and educational attainment seems to reach an entirely new scale in view of the unprecedented number of international students attending universities outside their home countries. In particular, a 'Western' education has become associated with a whole range of benefits, including advanced language skills, improved intercultural competencies, and a higher degree of self-reliance and flexibility (e.g. Hannerz 1996; Waters and Brooks 2011: 150–151). As more young people obtain university degrees, these additional experiences and qualifications are seen to provide a competitive advantage in the local job market (e.g. Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003; Waters 2009). Such findings imply that decisions on student mobility need to be understood within the context of young people's 'life planning' and their long-term prospects for a profitable career and a successful future life (Brooks and Everett 2008; Findlay et al. 2012).

The increase in educational opportunities and related mobility practices has not only implications for young people's future orientations but also for society at large. Geographical research shows that education-related mobilities often reflect patterns of social segregation. Based on statistical data available on the enrolments and performance of secondary schools in London, geographers have demonstrated that the best performing schools tend to attract students from a wider area and from richer neighbourhoods (Butler et al. 2007; Hamnett and Butler 2011; Harris 2013). Such findings imply that more privileged social groups are better able than others to lay propitious foundations for their children's future, mainly because they can draw on the cultural, social, and economic resources necessary to navigate an increasingly complex education market. Research into the internationalisation of higher education further suggests that such strategies of social reproduction are more and more played out at the global level (Findlay et al. 2012; Xiang and Shen 2009). Johanna Waters's (2006, 2012) research on student mobilities between Hong Kong and Canada is particularly instructive in this context. Waters shows that the benefits associated with an international education are almost exclusively available to upper-class families, who can afford to send their children abroad to study in North America. While children from lower social classes are also increasingly well educated, they primarily rely on the education provided locally. Waters (2006: 1046) therefore argues

that "international education is transforming the spatial scales over which social reproduction is achieved".

The global upward trend in international student migration is seen to perpetuate hierarchies not only within societies but also between regions and nations. Research on the internationalisation of tertiary education reveals that higher education institutions are primarily judged based on their national identity, whilst their distinct institutional identities are often of secondary importance (Marginson and van der Wende 2007). This becomes particularly apparent with regard to the high appreciation of Western Anglophone education in various parts of the world, and specifically in the Asian context (Waters and Brooks 2011). This general trend has been linked to the historically strong influence of colonial powers and foreign aid on the national education systems of countries in the global South (Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2009; Rizvi 2000). More recently, global rankings in higher education continue to reinforce the significance of a 'Western' education as a form of symbolic capital (Findlay et al. 2012; Marginson and van der Wende 2007). The implied global hierarchy in higher education and related imagined geographies have implications for the power relations that underpin the global knowledge system. On the one hand, Anglophone countries are able to manifest their leading position at the international level. On the other hand, major 'sending' countries, among them China, South Korea, and India (Goldin et al. 2011: 122 Table 5.2), also play an important role in the global education market. Whether from the perspective of the demand side or the supply side, international student migration constitutes a key concern for multiple stakeholders, who either try to profit from this global trend or attempt to control and restrict students' mobilities (Altbach and Knight 2007; Waters and Brooks 2011: 22–44).

In view of these developments, some authors have argued that most countries in the global South are being placed at the periphery (Altbach 1989). However, shifting the focus to these countries may in fact contribute to a fuller understanding of young people's mobilities and related social effects. Studies conducted in the global South have been particularly successful in challenging the assumption that institutions within the formal education system are the primary loci of knowledge acquisition (Froerer and Portisch 2012; see also Holloway et al. 2010). Instead, they demonstrate that young people's learning takes place in various spaces around which their daily lives are organised. The connection between young people's spatial mobility, learning processes, and livelihood strategies has been made explicit by Filippo and Caroline Osella (2000a). Based on their field research in Kerala, South India, the authors show that labour migration to countries in the Gulf Region constitutes a vital opportunity for young men to earn money, to see a new place, to acquire new skills, and to accumulate consumer goods. The newly gained wealth and experiences in turn allowed these young men to attain social recognition as

mature men who can provide for their families and the wider community. The authors therefore conclude that "Gulf migration has begun to play a crucial role in movements along the male life-cycle" (ibid.: 120).

These findings underpin the assertion that it is difficult and perhaps even counterproductive to make a sharp distinction between education and labour migration. Migrating for work purposes – whether within or across national borders – entails a variety of learning processes in the form of training new technical and social skills, the acquisition of a foreign language, or the very experience of travelling to an unfamiliar place and assimilating to a different lifestyle (Parry 2003; Rao and Hossain 2012). Similarly, young people's decision to migrate for educational purposes often forms an integral part of their occupational careers, as many young migrants work alongside formal education out of immediate financial needs or because of more long-term interests in economic opportunities that are unavailable or severely limited back home (Olwig and Valentin 2014; Valentin 2012b). This suggests that it is important to think through young people's mobilities in broader terms than the distinction between education and labour migration suggests and to explore how different forms of mobilities link to the ultimate aim to 'make a living' in an increasingly interconnected world (Sørensen and Olwig 2002).

Whilst the hope for improved living standards motivates many young people to relocate to a new place, it is not at all certain that spatial mobility indeed leads to social ascent. Research conducted in India (Cross 2010) and Kenya (Frederiksen 2002) shows that many young people decide to move from rural areas to the city because they want to find an employment that matches their educational attainments. But often young migrants come to realise that the education they have obtained back home is of little value within the urban context. Faced with a highly competitive urban labour market, many young migrants are therefore confronted with a sense of disillusion and sometimes with severe economic problems. In a similar vein, studies conducted in Anglophone countries reveal that the influx of international student migrants is often viewed with scepticism by the local population and, in the worst case, has exacerbated forms of discrimination based on young people's national or racial backgrounds (Collins 2010). In addition, institutional practices and stricter immigration laws further limit opportunities for migrants to integrate into the host community (Fincher and Shaw 2009; Madge, Raghuram, and Noxolo 2014). Rather than being able to fulfil the hope for a better future life, young migrants may find themselves exposed to numerous risks and to the prospect of their own future marginality as a result of moving to an unfamiliar place.

In public discourses, however, negative implications of spatial mobility are often represented in a rather one-dimensional manner, in the sense that they tend to be associated with specific purposes of migration and even specific destinations. Laura

Kunreuther (2006), for example, found that the stories of foreign workers in the Gulf region broadcasted on the radio in the home country fuel anxieties about horrific work conditions, exploitation, and discrimination. In comparison, Francis Collins's (2012) research on the internet as an important source of information for young people interested in studying abroad shows that the ideas and images disseminated about educational opportunities and student life in New Zealand paint a rather idealistic picture. In a similar vein, it has been argued that dominant images and discourses of foreign places tend to be directional, as they commonly imply that the 'urban' or the 'West' are more advanced, wealthy, sophisticated, or simply better than the 'rural' or the 'East' (Madge et al. 2009; Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2003). These studies put into perspective the assertion that technological advancements, and especially the proliferation of online media, can facilitate cultural exchanges and open up new opportunities for an enhanced mutual understanding (Adams and Ghose 2003; Holloway and Valentine 2000a). As mass-mediated associations are hardly value-free, it is likely that they further implant stereotypical ideas based on which young people's mobility practices are being judged by others. In addition, these accounts indicate that, in an interconnected world, it is necessary to understand young people's perceptions and related future orientations in the context of both observable practices and imagined geographies. Fazal Rizvi (2011: 697–698) emphasises this point in writings on student mobility in that he notes:

> As people – as well as governments and institutions such as universities – experience on a daily basis the realities of transnational economic relations, technological and media innovations, and cultural flows that cut across national borders, with greater speed and intensity than ever before, they increasingly use these experiences to make strategic calculations of their futures, and how they might take advantage of the opportunities global interconnectivity now offers. These calculations are not however made in a void, but within an imaginary of global conditions and possibilities.

As this quote exemplifies, it is now generally recognised that enhanced levels of mobility and global connectivity equally affect those young people actively involved in travels as well as those of their peers who are relatively settled in one place. Nonetheless, it can be criticised that the relevant literature has been primarily focused on the question 'why young people move', but has neglected the twin question 'why some of them do not move' (Hammer and Tamas 1997; see also Fortier 2014). There are a few exceptions to this general trend, however. Peter Fischer and Gunnar Malmberg (2001), for example, analysed age-specific migration patterns in Sweden and found that some people are strongly committed to a certain place, because they are deeply embedded in the local community or because they are in a stable employment situation. Such factors contribute to a sense of rootedness, as a result of which people are likely to remain resident in a specific location throughout their lives. Fischer and Malmberg emphasise that people may

consciously decide to stay in one place in order to seize upon 'location-specific insider advantages'. More recently, Johanna Waters and Maggi Leung (2013, 2014) conducted a study on new degree programmes offered by British universities in Hong Kong. These programmes present an alternative educational pathway to those young people who could neither secure a place in one of the domestic universities nor afford to study abroad. In particular, the students appreciated that these new educational opportunities were generally less expensive, required less time for completion, and offered more flexibility for young people already in employment. These accounts imply that relative immobility may in fact offer a number of benefits. However, a unilateral focus on mobility tends to see the reasons for immobility primarily in the risks involved in moving to a new place and hence may reproduce the misleading impression that spatial immobility is self-evidently a form of passiveness and increasingly an obstacle to social mobility.

In order to avoid such an oversimplification of the relationship between spatial mobility and social mobility, I seek to address two interrelated questions: Why do some young people move and why do others stay in one locality? In this context, I interrogate young people's spatial practices across various scales, ranging from mass migration movements over virtual travels using online social media to small-scale mobilities which form part of young people's daily routines. In so doing, I not only account for the fact that young people are actively engaged in different forms of mobilities and relative immobilities. But I also want to gain a fuller understanding of how their perceptions of self and others and their future orientations relate to dominant representations of spatial mobilities. In particular, I aim to further unpack what meanings are given to young people's (im)mobilities and how certain spatial practices influence young people's potential to become socially mobile. In this way, I hope to contribute not only to studies of the geography of youth but also to mobilities research, more generally.

Conclusion

The extensive field of youth studies is essentially grounded in the theoretical concern of showing how young people are actively involved in the making of their social spaces. In particular, young people's lives are generally taken to serve as a good indicator for the direction in which society is moving in the future. Questions about processes of social change have gained in urgency in recent years, as societies in various parts of the world witness a number of large-scale structural transformations. The relevant literature makes clear that – often within one generation only – economic and political crises or the proliferation of mass education and global media have significantly altered people's life chances and future prospects. On the one hand, these developments raise the hope that

the younger generation may be able to seize on newly emerging educational and occupational opportunities and, in so doing, may bring about the future progress hoped for by society at large. On the other hand, young people across the world seem to be in a highly uncertain and difficult situation as they struggle to reconcile pervasive discourses on a better future with the realities of their present-day lives, particularly with regard to their educational and occupational experiences. This in turn has raised concerns that the young population may become increasingly frustrated and hopeless, with adverse consequences for wider society.

The ongoing debate signifies the progress made in youth studies since the beginning of the twentieth century. Scholars now take serious young people's ways of thinking about and acting upon their situations, thereby illuminating both the potential of as well as the limits to young people's agency. Nonetheless, the debate about the agency of youth, for the most part, continues to revolve around dualistic categorisations: conformist versus deviant, aspirational versus apathetic, and mobile versus immobile. Such rather simplistic conceptions of youth agency, however, ignore that young people may approach the future in uneven and often unpredictable ways. In addition, a large share of the empirical work on youth deals with a specific subgroup of youth, and especially with those young people who tend to be more visible, precisely because they are involved in more spectacular actions.

My own study is therefore centrally taken up with examining the following question: What types of agency do young people in urban Nepal demonstrate? I aim to answer this research question based on an in-depth analysis of young people's time-space-strategies for the future. I am specifically interested to learn how young people in Kathmandu imagine and talk about their educational and occupational future prospects and how their future orientations relate them to other actors and to their society. I therefore investigate how social expectations for the younger population play out in young people's own aspirations and to what extent young people identify themselves with dominant discourses on the role of youth in wider society. In this way, I want to remain attentive to variations in young people's strategies and avoid reproducing stereotypical ideas commonly attached to the social category of youth. By bringing the literature on youth agency in conversation with theoretical work on aspiration and mobility, I seek to contribute to a more nuanced perspective on the agency of young people as well as advance our understanding of the concepts of aspiration and mobility, more generally.

CHAPTER TWO

Ways of locating, interacting, and learning

Methodological approaches

A review of the origins of the field of youth studies reveals that some of the limitations of existing conceptualisations of youth agency can be ascribed to methodological issues. Until the 1990s, empirical studies of youth dealt almost exclusively with urban, white young men and were primarily conducted in countries in the global North. Since then, however, the reinvigorated interest in the concept of youth agency has led to changes in the ways in which social scientists work with young people. Increasingly, researchers have studied the cultural practices of girls and young women (see McRobbie 1991) and of youth in the global South (e.g. Honwana and de Boeck 2005; Weiss 2002). In addition, there has been a trend towards collaborative research practices, as it became more established that young people are social agents in their own right (e.g. Cahill 2007; Matthews et al. 1999). This means that young people are no longer merely research subjects. Rather, they are now often actively involved in the research process as partners. Young people's participation in research has provided new perspectives, which often challenge dominant ideas about young people's lives and help to uncover the small gestures and practices through which young people grow in their own power (e.g. Dyson 2014; Kraftl 2008). The advancements made in terms of research methodology have allowed social scientists to address some of the limitations of previous empirical studies of youth and to look at young people's agency from various angles.

My own research into the future strategies of young people in Nepal ties in with these ongoing efforts to broaden the scope of youth research in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the concept of agency. This aim served me as a guiding principle for the many choices I made over the course of the research process regarding the selection of research participants, the research site, and the methods used for data collection and for data analysis. In all these decision-making situations, I strove to maintain a reflexive approach towards my own conduct and to remain alert to multiple interpretations and realities. In particular, I sought to bring to the fore the many ways in which meanings and positions are repeatedly rethought and redefined by all parties

involved in the research process. My research strategy therefore builds on interpretive and constructionist approaches to the production of knowledge (e.g. Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992; Haraway 1988). In line with this epistemology, I understand knowledge as being actively produced in the process of social interactions between the researcher and those involved in the research. This means that knowledge is always situated within the relationships of representation and power inherent in the research process (e.g. Haraway 1988; McDowell 1992; Mullings 1999). Thus, I acknowledge that qualitative research requires "more than getting the 'facts' right; it demands 'doing' it well" (Watson and Till 2010: 126). I seek to achieve this aim by making transparent the way in which I gathered and analysed information, and by presenting the material in sufficient detail for others to understand how I arrived at my interpretations.

In this chapter I start to do so by describing how my research strategy evolved over time, how the different steps and turns contributed towards the overall aim of my enquiry, and which (un)anticipated limitations arose in the course of the project. I first introduce the protagonists of this study and explain the reasons behind my decision to work with this specific group of young Nepalis. This is followed by a discussion of the decisions I made regarding the research setting, the methods for data collection and the sampling strategy. In this context, I explain my decision to conduct a one-month pilot study five months prior to a more extensive period of fieldwork. In total, I spent nine months conducting research in Kathmandu in 2011-2012. During this time I interacted with young Nepalis and learned about their future strategies mainly through interviews and focus group discussions. In the discussion of these field methods, I reflect on the benefits and limitations of these methods and describe the steps I took to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Nepali youth and the social influences that shape their lives. I then move on to discuss more overarching issues, including language, data usage, and positionality. While research ethics are considered throughout the discussion of the research process, I separately address questions about confidentiality, anonymisation, and reciprocity in the final section of this chapter.

Research participants

In order to complement existing studies of youth in Nepal and in the global South, more generally, I strove to engage with a group of young people who so far have received comparatively little attention in both scholarly and public debates about youth. Researchers working in Nepal first became interested in young people's lives in the face of enhanced efforts by national and international actors to establish a system of mass

education following the changes in the country's political leadership in the 1950s and 1960s. The large majority of studies conducted on Nepali youth therefore focus on school-aged children (e.g. Ahearn 2001a; Bhatta 2004; Ragsdale 1989; Reed and Reed 1968; Skinner 1990; Valentin 2005). However, as Liechty (2003) and Snellinger (2009, 2010) have shown, some people in Nepal, and especially those continuing to higher levels of education, may still identify as youth, even if they are aged 20 years and above. In view of the relative paucity of studies of young Nepalis in their twenties and thirties, I chose to concentrate on this specific age group.

The decisions I made regarding the selection of research participants were also based on my conceptual approach and my interest in vital conjunctures of youth. A central proposition of this theory is that questions about potential future pathways gain in urgency during particular periods when people feel that they are approaching another milestone in their lives. This point was strongly supported by the insights I gained into the perspectives and priorities of young Nepalis in Kathmandu during my pilot study in March/ April 2011. I decided to conduct a pilot study in order to identify potential entry points for my research, to establish initial contacts with various stakeholders of the project, and to test and refine the methods I intended to use. For this purpose, I visited several institutions of higher education in Kathmandu and arranged to speak with academic staff and students, both in groups and individually. The conversations I had with students made me realise that some of them did not feel that there was any immediate need to think about what to do next from the point of view of their present situation. In particular, students studying at intermediate or bachelor's level were relatively unconcerned by my questions about their plans for the future. They explained to me – often in a resolute manner – that they would study full time to complete their current course and afterwards they would continue their academic education. In comparison, the master's students I spoke with considered a whole range of possible pathways after completing their graduate studies and hence felt much more ambiguous about their immediate future plans. Many of these young people consequently expressed great interest in my research, as underlying questions were of direct concern for them. This shared interest offered a good vantage point for my research into the educational and occupational aspirations of young people in Nepal. I therefore primarily worked with young Nepalis studying for a master's degree in Kathmandu.

My initial decision to engage with university students subsequently required me to think about how differences in terms of young people's socio-spatial backgrounds and in terms of their attitudes towards national politics may play out on campus. In particular, it was important to keep in mind that patterns of unequal access to higher education in Nepal commonly reflect long-existent social inequalities. A survey conducted by Pramod

Bhatta and his colleagues (2008) offers a good overview of the nature and the extent of unequal representation in Nepal's tertiary education sector. The authors obtained student enrolment data for the academic year 2005/ 2006 from 26 public university campuses in different parts of Nepal. Their quantitative analysis shows that upper-caste men, namely Brahmin and Chhetri, as well as Newars, the ethnic group that has long dominated social and cultural life within the Kathmandu Valley, were over-represented (OR) among the student body in comparison with the percentage of Nepal's total population (see columns 2 and 3 in Table 2.1). Other social groups continued to be under-represented (UR), including: ethnic groups – formerly known as 'tribes', now commonly referred to as Janajatis[1]; Nepalis of Indian, Hindu origin who reside in the Terai, the southern plains of Nepal – called Madhesis; people who under the Hindu caste system were considered to be 'untouchable' – now commonly known as Dalits; and women. Based on these figures, the authors conclude that historical disparities remain largely intact among Nepal's educated youth.

For comparison, I adapted the table shown in the paper by Bhatta and colleagues (2008: 242 Table 1) and added another column (shaded grey) to include the corresponding figures I obtained on the public campus where I conducted my own research. At first sight, this brief overview of the student composition confirms that

Table 2.1 Over- and under-represented groups in Nepal's tertiary education sector

Social Group	% in Total Population [a]	% in Total Student Body [b]	% in Total Survey Respondents [c]	Status of Representation
Hill Brahmin-Chhetri	30.89	68.4	67.1	OR
Newar	5.48	12.3	17.5	OR
Male	49.94	62.3	63.0	OR
Janajati	31.72	12.7	11.5	UR
Madhesi	13.77	4.0	2.5	UR
Dalit	12.77	1.4	1.5	UR
Female	50.06	37.7	37.0	UR

Sources:
[a] Population Census 2001 (CBS 2002).
[b] Enrolment data obtained from 26 constituent campuses of TU in different parts of the country for the academic year 2005/ 2006 (Bhatta et al. 2008).
[c] Findings of the survey that I conducted among 400 students at one of TU's constituent campuses in the urban Kathmandu Valley at the beginning of the academic year 2011/ 2012.

[1] In most sociological surveys in Nepal, including the one cited, Newars are listed separately from the collective category of the Janajatis, despite being officially recognised as an ethnic group. This is a sensible distinction to make, because Newars, and especially those residing in the Kathmandu Valley, are generally in a better socio-economic position than most other ethnic groups.

studying at university in Nepal continues to be a privilege of upper-status groups and especially of young men. Nevertheless, I found that these figures hide a number of trends which suggest that patterns of social inequality have started to change or at least have become more equivocal. A closer look at the statistical data reveals that in most of the social sciences courses gender parity has been reached. In addition, about two-thirds of the survey respondents had migrated to the Kathmandu Valley from other parts of the country: 60 of the 75 districts of Nepal were listed by them as places of origin. Many of them belonged to ethnic groups or lower castes and often were the first in their extended families to continue to higher education. It should also be noted that the apparent under-representation of Madhesis conceals that many young Nepalis living along the open border with India are studying at tertiary institutions in India.

These initial insights suggest that there is a need for further investigations into the ways in which historically rooted social inequalities play out in the lives of young Nepalis alongside more recent structural developments. On the one hand, it is vital to remain attentive to the ways in which established markers of social difference – be it gender, caste/ ethnicity, class or geographical origin – continue to shape young people's educational and occupational experiences and, in relation to this, their future orientations. On the other hand, it needs to be examined in more depth to what extent major changes in terms of educational expansion, migratory movements, or economic and political transitions have an impact on young people's lives in Nepal, regardless of their social origin. Whilst previous studies of young people studying at universities in Nepal generally provide a good starting point to look into these issues, they have primarily focused on young people belonging to upper-status groups and especially on young men (Liechty 2003; Snellinger 2010). By contrast, I sought to engage with both male and female students of different caste/ ethnic and geographical origin. By including young people belonging to social groups which are underrepresented at university and hence less visible among the student community, I suggest that it becomes possible to shed new light on the concept of youth agency and specifically on the ways in which young people's capacity to act links to their social and spatial identities.

In addition, any study conducted at a university campus in Nepal needs to be cognisant of how students politics may come into play. The connection between higher education and national politics is deeply rooted in Nepal's history. Instances of student politics can be traced back to protests by university students against the Ranas' rule in 1947 (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999; Snellinger 2005). Subsequently, several of the students involved in these protests went into exile in India where they founded the Nepali Congress and later the Communist Party of Nepal. The political heritage of these two parties continues to be of importance, with the national parties, which claim to be

descended from them, having won the elections to the second Constituent Assembly held in November 2013. Under the rule of the 'party-less' Panchayat regime between 1960 and 1990 student organisations further gained in relevance for national politics, as they were able to continue to operate as legal entities, whilst political parties were forced to go underground (Snellinger 2005). Since that time, most student leaders do not necessarily only fight for matters of direct concern to the university students they are supposed to represent, but also incorporate the political programmes of the national parties they are affiliated with (ibid.).

Initially, the involvement of young people in national politics was centred around Kathmandu's university campuses. This, however, changed with the emergence of the Maoist movement in the more rural and remote parts of Nepal during the latter half of the 1990s. This new political force quickly gained in popularity among rural youth, mainly because young people in rural Nepal severely lacked opportunities to attain a good education and to achieve a livelihood (Ghimire 2005; Pettigrew 2007; Pherali 2011; Zharkevich 2009). During the civil war between 1996 and 2006, many young people saw the underground existence of the Maoists as an opportunity to hold out against persisting inequalities (Mikesell 2006; Pherali 2011) and to broaden their outlook by personally experiencing life outside the confines of the village community (Pettigrew 2007; Zharkevich 2009). Since the end of the civil war in 2006, the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) has been represented on the country's university campuses by its affiliated student activists just like any other national party. In this sense, all of the political student organisations based at university campuses in Nepal are essentially sister organisations of national parties, even to the extent that elections to the student unions are now taken as a proxy for country-wide elections to the national government (Snellinger 2007, 2009, 2010). In the light of these historical developments and continuing debates, most Nepalis have come to think of public university campuses as microcosms of national party rivalries.

Political student activists were certainly the most visible subgroup among the student community also on the public campus in Kathmandu where I conducted this research. Their party slogans and emblems were displayed on the walls of the campus premises. In addition, it was commonplace for regular events in the academic year, such as the freshers' induction programme, the campus sports day, or vacation courses organised during the semester break, to be repurposed by members of the student union for their own political campaigns. However, the majority of young people studying on the campus sought to maintain a neutral stance, as they felt that the student activists did not represent their needs and interests. Some of the students I spoke with even openly criticised political student leaders for hindering rather than helping students' progress with their studies.

This is not to say that the majority of university students in Nepal are indifferent to the political development of their country. On the contrary, it seemed to be highly important for them to stay up-to-date with political debates as this signified a person's status as being well educated. Since the beginning of a mass education system in Nepal, formal schooling has been associated with a higher degree of political awareness and the ability to form one's own opinions by accessing various information sources (Skinner and Holland 1996: 283). But this kind of political awareness must not be taken as being synonymous with political activism. While this distinction seems to be crucial in the context of Nepal, it often is lost from sight in view of the ongoing discussion about Nepal's educated youth. In recent years, public and scholarly debates about university students in Nepal have predominately revolved around the pros and cons of students' active involvement in party politics. In order to contribute a more nuanced perspective to the debate about the role of youth in Nepali society, I chose to represent the voices of those students who were not affiliated to any political party, as their views so far remain largely unheard.

Based on a review of the existing literature on youth in Nepal prior to my field trips and the initial insights I gained during my pilot study, I arrived at several criteria to select participants for my research project. These criteria can be summarised in the following way: Young Nepalis of both genders and from different social and geographical backgrounds who have in common that they are at least 20 years old, study for a master's degree at a university campus in Kathmandu, and are not actively involved in student politics. Young people who can identify with this description have been largely neglected in existing studies of youth in Nepal (or elsewhere for that matter). I therefore hope to provide new perspectives to the literature on the agency of youth based on interactions with this specific group of young people. In combination with the overarching aim of my research, the selection criteria I have outlined in this section formed the basis for any subsequent decision I made regarding the specific research site and the sampling strategy.

Research setting

My decision to work with young Nepalis studying at one of Kathmandu's institutions of higher education triggered further questions about the physically entry point, where I could meet potential research participants and start the data gathering process. Initially, I wanted to talk to university students from various institutions, including public and private colleges. During the pilot study, however, I realised that a multisite research approach significantly complicated my attempts to establish a good rapport with the research participants and to keep in contact with them after the first round of interviews.

This may have been due to the fact that the respondents did not perceive me as part of their own social network. Based on these experiences, I decided to revise my research strategy and to base my study on a single campus, once I returned to Kathmandu five months later for a longer period of field work. This approach turned out to be more effective: After I had gone through an initial round of introductions on the campus and demonstrated my commitment to the student community through my daily presence on and around the campus premises, I was able to get to know individual students better and to become, incrementally, more embedded within their circles of friends. This allowed me to engage in more profound conversations and to pick up more naturally on issues of concern to the students as such information travelled fast through the grapevine. Grounding my research within a specific campus community, therefore, was an important first step towards developing an in-depth understanding of young people's educational experiences and their daily routines.

The first-hand insights into Kathmandu's heterogeneous educational landscape that I had gained during my pilot study still proved to be very valuable for making an informed decision as to which campus to choose. In total, there are four multidisciplinary universities in Nepal; two of these are based within the Kathmandu Valley: Tribhuvan University (TU) – Nepal's oldest and only state-run university – and Kathmandu University (KU) – a private institution founded in 1991. In contrast to TU, KU is perceived to cater primarily for a more exclusive group of students and to offer more saleable subjects. The admission process is known to be highly competitive and tuition fees are more than double those charged by TU and its affiliated colleges. Although TU's history has been closely linked to student politics, which continue to cause interruptions to the academic schedule, it serves a much larger and more diverse student body. During the academic year 2011/ 2012, a total of 389,460 students were enrolled at TU's central campus, its 60 constituent campuses, and its 826 affiliated colleges.[2] These figures are indicative of the extent to which Nepal's tertiary education sector constitutes a highly diverse as well as divergent landscape. During the one-month pilot study, I visited six different higher education institutions, including TU's central departments and constituent campuses, privately-run affiliated colleges, and KU institutions. In addition, I had the opportunity to meet students in other settings outside the classrooms, such as teashops or youth clubs. Based on these various interactions, I was able to gain a good overview of the socio-economic backgrounds of students studying at a specific institution, of the main reasons behind students' choice of institution/ course of study, and of the way in which students compare themselves with peers studying at other academic institutions.

[2] For the enrolment figures and number of colleges, I referred to the statistics published on the web page of the university during the academic year 2011/ 2012. Available online: http://tribhuvan-university.edu.np/about-us/ [Last accessed July 25, 2012]

Thus, my decision to base my research project on one of TU's constituent campuses was reached after giving thorough consideration to various criteria, including the composition of the student body, location, and accessibility. I came to understand that students' choices of where to study were primarily influenced by their financial capacity and by the range of subjects offered by the institution and the class schedule. In order to reach out to young people from different social and geographical backgrounds, I therefore decided against the smaller affiliated colleges – many of which only taught one or two programmes at intermediate and bachelor's level – and instead chose one of the constituent campuses which offered master courses in multiple disciplines.[3] The campus also had a convenient size in terms of both its physical premises and the number of students enrolled. It was small enough to ensure that I could introduce myself to the student community within a relatively short time, but it was also big enough to allow for the anonymity of the individual interviewees. My request to join the campus at the start of the academic year 2011/ 2012 for the purpose of my doctoral research was welcomed by the campus administration and student community. The fact that I was then ne granted access to the institution was partly because I had visited the same campus already during my pilot study, but was also connected to aspects of positionality.

The research setting, however, did not remain confined to the site of the campus. Once I started visiting the campus regularly to meet with the students, my research site began to expand rapidly beyond the boundary of the wall that ran along the periphery of the campus premises. In part, this was because I was interested in learning more about the various spaces around which my respondents' daily lives were structured. But there were also some logistical reasons for why I ended up crisscrossing the city on a daily basis. I adapted to the participants' schedules, in order to make it easier for them to make time for us to meet. As the research participants lived and worked in different parts of the city, I could never be sure how far away from campus my efforts to conduct interviews with them and to follow their daily routines would take me by the end of the day. The evenings I occasionally spent with other Nepali and foreign friends at one of the restaurants which offered international cuisine to Kathmandu's upper middle-class and expat community. Even if the restaurant was located in the same part of the city as the campus, it was on these occasions that I felt furthest away from 'the field' and closest to 'home'. As I was

[3] Affiliated and constituent campuses of TU have in common that they follow TU's curricula and examinations, and often, though not always, employ the same teaching staff. Constituent campuses were initially established as independent colleges, for example TriChandra College in 1918. In an effort to centralise the provision of higher education in the 1970s, independent colleges were placed under the administrative and financial umbrella of TU which was founded in 1956 and remains up to 90 per cent financed by the government (Khaniya 2007: 120–121). By contrast, affiliated colleges were only established from the 1980s onwards, as private or community-run institutions, which means that their cost structure, including remunerations and tuition fees, is independent of state-financed subsidies.

moving through the culturally multifaceted and highly dense but also discontinuous space of the urban Kathmandu Valley, I often found it difficult to locate 'the field' (cf. Clifford 1997) and to decide when I was entering and when I was exiting it.

The setting of my research is therefore best described based on two metaphors, namely rhizome and string figures. Emily Martin (1997) uses these metaphors to rethink the conventional image of 'the field', and to explore processes and practices that do not neatly fit into a geographically or culturally defined site. Thinking of the research setting as a rhizome offers a way to explore how different places and events that I used and experienced during my previous visits to Kathmandu often unexpectedly helped me to make sense of my respondents' narratives and perceptions. For example, when I stayed in Kathmandu in March/ April 2011 for the pilot study, I occasionally used the office facilities of a youth organisation, mainly for practical reasons such as internet access and electricity backup. The personal contacts that I established with some of the members of the organisation turned out to be highly valuable at a much later stage of the research process, after I learnt that many of my respondents were involved in similar youth-led initiatives. Furthermore, thinking of the research setting as 'string figures', as Martin (1997) suggests, helped me to connect to the larger scope of the study certain encounters and actions which at first sight did not appear to be of relevance. My casual conversations with young Nepalis who had studied abroad and my sporadic visits to private schools allowed me to develop a more differentiated understanding of my respondents' aspirations to study abroad. In the course of my fieldwork I continuously sought to keep in sight the wider context in which my respondents' perceptions and practices were situated. For this purpose, it was crucial to set my research not solely within the confines of the campus walls, but instead within the many often nonlinear and fractured processes that linked my respondents to the rest of Nepali society.

Field methods and sampling strategies

At the centre of my research on the agency of youth are questions about young people's time-space-strategies for the future. In order to investigate how young people envision and narrate their educational and occupational future prospects, I primarily relied on semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. By using different formats of facilitating discussions with and among research participants, I was able to compensate for some of the limitations of these methods and to make maximal use of the benefits each method offers. During individual interviews people tend to be more open about personal ambitions and biographical details, as they need to be less concerned about how others may judge their ideas and experiences (e.g. Rubin and Rubin 1995). In-depth interviews

therefore promise to be a useful method to learn about young people's perceptions of self and others and to discuss more sensitive issues, including any hopes and fears people may have regarding their own future lives. Whilst group discussions are not the right forum to revert to such confidential information, they generally constitute a good way to identify similarities in and differences between participants' interpretations which may be less explicit in individual interviews (e.g. Bosco and Herman 2010). I therefore organised a series of group discussions with the aim to take better account of variations in young people's future orientations and to investigate whether and, if so, how participants referred to dominant discourses when talking about young people's role in wider society.

Even in combination, however, these two research methods are said to provide only a limited understanding and knowledge of people's ideas and experiences. Qualitative research which is largely based on 'talking heads' (Ortner 2003: 15) has been criticised for losing much of the richness and depth produced by participant observations. More recently, some of the key thinkers behind the 'new mobilities paradigm' have argued that existing social scientific research methods – specifically the interview and the focus group – can only give a distant perspective on people's experiences from the point of destination or origin (e.g. Büscher and Urry 2009; Urry 2007: 39–42). Consequently, in order to fully capture the significance of spatial mobilities for people's life chances and for their relationships with each other, it appears to be imperative to move along with and to see with the research subjects (see also Fincham, McGuinness, and Murray 2009). These points of criticism imply that the researcher's ability to interpret people's practices and perceptions accurately is a matter of the co-presence of the researcher.

Over the course of my field work, I was able to take part in young people's everyday activities in numerous ways: I attended the classes on campus. I mingled with groups of students by the tea stalls that lined the roadside opposite of the campus wall. I joined students on several day trips to picnic sites located outside Kathmandu. I travelled with them on public transport to different parts of the city. I visited them at their offices and, occasionally, at their homes. I met them and their friends in parks, street restaurants, and cafés. I went with them to information sessions on education programmes in the US and Europe. And together we participated in volunteer projects organised by youth organisations in Kathmandu. On the one hand, these different ways of interacting with young Nepalis on a daily basis proved to be useful for practical reasons. Arranging for interviews was initially a time-consuming activity and sometimes even frustrating, as it was not uncommon for respondents to postpone the meeting at the last minute or simply make me and my research assistant wait for what easily could turn into an hour or two. Following students in their daily routines certainly helped me to negotiate these issues more effectively, in the sense that I could establish a good rapport with some individuals

and I came to know which times and places were convenient for the respondents. On the other hand, I also gained a better understanding of the ideas and images which formed part of young people's everyday life and which influenced them in their attempts to map out potential future pathways. By accompanying research participants on their daily travels through Kathmandu, I came to see the different socio-spatial settings around which my respondents' daily lives were organised. These insights enabled me to explore why even small-scale, everyday mobilities may make a difference for young people's perceptions and their future orientations. In these ways, participative and mobile techniques have served me well as a tool to initiate and facilitate discussions and to gain a better understanding of participants' everyday activities and the specific socio-cultural context in which their lives are situated.

At the same time, there are good reasons why the narratives of research participants rather than the researcher's observations may form a better basis for contemporary social science research. As Peter Merriman (2014) argues, it is questionable whether physical proximity indeed enables the researcher to represent the experiences and perceptions of the research participants in a more authentic and accurate manner. Each individual experiences a specific socio-spatial setting differently. An overemphasis on the researcher's impressions therefore risks "obscuring the many complex (often invisible) social and political practices and relations which co-constitute spaces, events and contexts" (Merriman 2014: 176). Thus, a well-conceived set of interview questions may at times be more effective at capturing people's experiences and perceptions of a specific place, movement, or practice than a recording of the researcher's own observations (see also Dewsbury 2010). Moreover, fieldwork is increasingly 'delocalised' (Marcus 1998), with the result that the usefulness of participative methods is often curtailed. In order to explore the complexity of social life in an increasingly interconnected world, it has become necessary to consider longer stretches of time and larger areas of space than covered in classic ethnographic studies. In many cases, the scope of social science research has therefore expanded beyond the observable (see also Gupta and Ferguson 1997).

These issues are of particular relevance for the questions that lie at the centre of my own enquiry. In order to understand the motivations behind young people's strategies for the future, I had to dwell on their childhood memories and their educational and occupational histories. As most of my respondents were born during the mid-1980s, my investigations essentially extended over a time frame of at least three decades. In addition, many of the young people studying at the public university campus had migrated to Kathmandu from various parts of Nepal, including some rural areas in the mountainous parts of eastern and western Nepal and in the hill region (full-fledged mountains by European standards of up to 3,000 meters altitude) (see Figure 2.1). Students from these

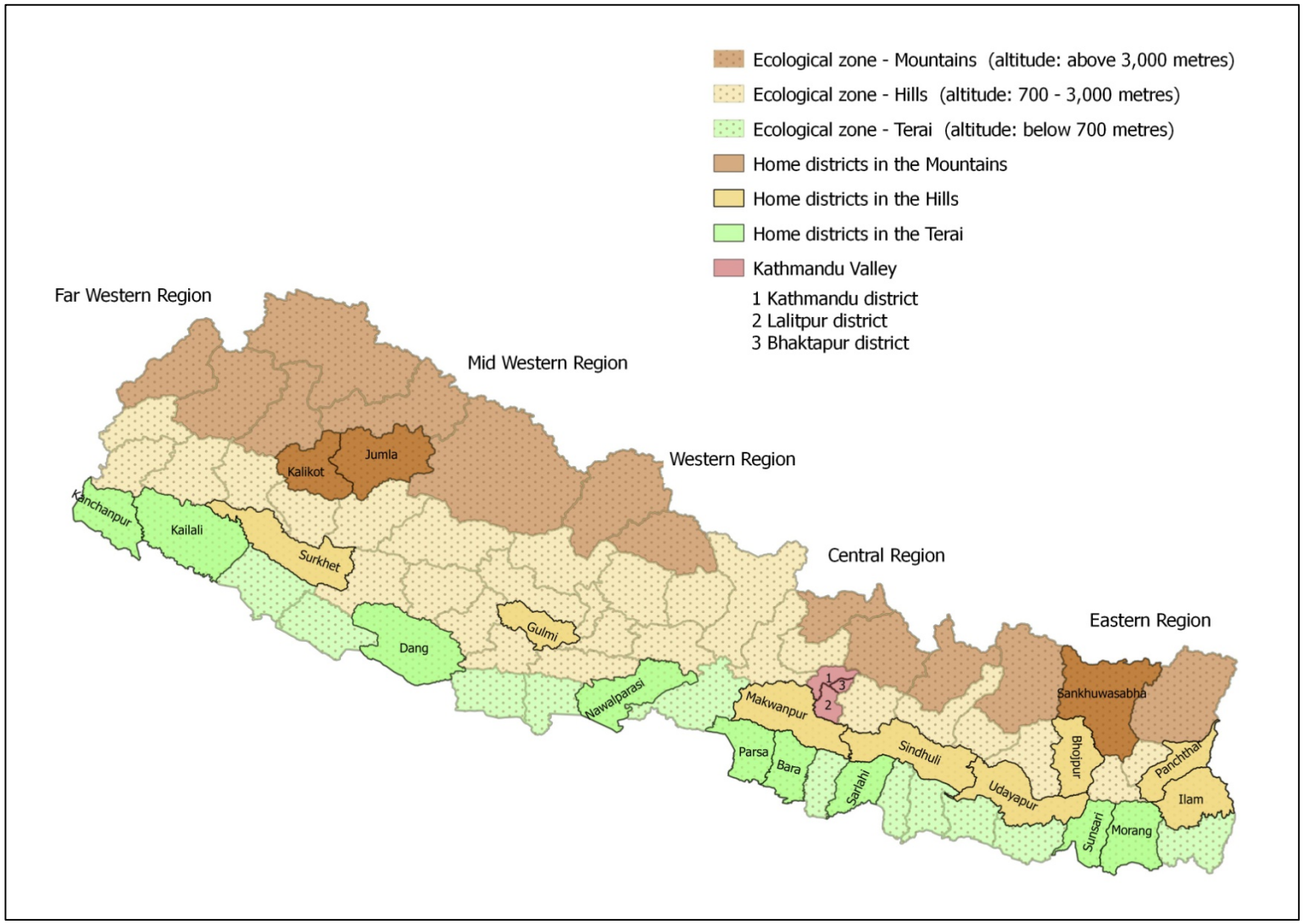

Figure 2.1 Map of Nepal illustrating respondents' home districts, the three ecological zones, and regional categorisation.

remote areas visited their natal homes no more than once a year, if at all, mainly because it took several days by bus and by foot to reach these villages from Kathmandu. Partly because travelling through Nepal continues to be a time-consuming and precarious undertaking, and partly because students' places of origin were few and far between, I was not able to accompany research participants to their places of origin. Despite these challenges, I could not ignore that young people's spatial identities and their experience of moving to the capital city and of settling into Kathmandu's urban society significantly shaped their perceptions of self and others, and related to this, their future orientations. However, in terms of both space and time, it would have been not only impractical, but also largely impossible, to use participative and mobile methods in order to gather the information necessary for my analysis of the formation of young people's aspirations and the spatial dimension of vital conjunctures of youth.

At the same time, I recognise that the narratives of my research participants only provide a meaningful basis for an in-depth analysis if they are put in context with the wider social, economic, and political circumstances. As part of my fieldwork and the process of data analysis, I therefore paid close attention to the settings of the interviews and the focus group discussions. I also noted in my research diary any incidences which stimulated more informal conversations with research participants. Furthermore, I sought to combine the data emerging from these conversations with other information sources. For this purpose, I reviewed numerous newspaper articles that were published in Kathmandu's English dailies during the period of my research. In addition, I chose to embed my empirical material in a variety of historical details, whenever this kind of secondary information directly relates to the stories told by the research participants. My decision in this regard was not so much to 'validate' what I was hearing during the conversations with the research participants, but to situate their accounts within the wider context, and to stay alert to different realities and interpretations. In this, I followed Nigel and Jane Fielding (1986: 33), who suggest that triangulation in qualitative research should be carried out "with the intention of adding breadth or depth to our analysis but not for the purpose of pursuing 'objective' truth".

Quantitative data and campus survey

To start off my research project on the university campus, I first wanted to find out more details about the composition of the student community. I know now that approximately 5,000 students were studying on the campus at the time of my fieldwork. But I came to know about this figure only when I was reading a newspaper article published in 2013, i.e. a year after I had returned from Kathmandu and was already writing up my findings.

During my fieldwork, however, my attempts to obtain any sort of enrolment data remained fruitless. After my visit to the campus admission office in October 2011, I noted in my research diary:

> I somehow tried to squeeze between the piles of papers and the people who were filling in admission forms. Others simply handed in the forms from outside the building through the window grid. A staff member explained that they granted admission on a rolling basis, meaning one could join the campus any time, even a few days before the end-of-year examinations. I realised that I might not get anywhere with my repeated request for some information about enrolment figures.

Data availability and accuracy are common problems as regards most quantitative information about Nepal. This was an issue I also kept in mind whenever I drew from secondary sources, such as newspaper articles or policy reports. In the case of the specific challenge of obtaining a better overview of the student population, I decided to conduct a small survey among the students studying for a master's degree during my third week on campus. For this purpose, I prepared a two-page bilingual questionnaire which included a short introductory statement about my research and requested biographical details (i.e. name, age, marital status, place of origin) as well as basic information about the person's educational and occupational background. At the bottom of the questionnaire I included two open questions where respondents could mention 'anything [they] would like to tell me about student life in Nepal' and could leave their contact details, if they wanted to continue being part of the research project. After consulting with students and lecturers, I decided to go to the different classrooms during breaks and right after classes ended to ask students to complete the questionnaire. The survey provided me with a database which included information about 400 students from across all of the different master programmes taught on campus.

Apart from providing a good overview of the social and geographical composition of the student body, the survey turned out to be crucial in two perspectives. First, going to the different departments and introducing myself as a PhD student to a large number of people within a relatively short time significantly helped to resolve potential misinterpretations of my presence on campus. I had come to know that within the first two weeks rumours had been spreading that the foreigner wanted to do 'job interviews' with students. By clarifying in the introductory statement and in person the purpose of my visit, the next steps of my research and the use of any information given by the students, I was able to avoid false expectations and to seek informed consent. Second, the database became a vital tool for approaching students for individual interviews and for starting off conversations. Three-quarters of the survey participants had written their contact details on the questionnaire. In addition, respondents were generally excited to hear from me again after the survey and happy to further elaborate on the information they had noted in

the questionnaire. While the survey did not in itself contribute in-depth insights, it certainly enhanced the efficiency of the other research methods used and especially proved to be useful to identify research participants based on the selection criteria.

In-depth interviews

A basic premise of my research strategy was to work with a comparatively diverse group of young people: men and women, upper and lower castes, those who had grown up in Kathmandu as well as those who had migrated from other parts of the country. In order to reach out to young people from different social and geographical backgrounds, I used several approaches to identify and select potential research participants. When I first started conducting individual interviews, I largely relied on 'convenience sampling' (Bryman 2012: 201). Following the survey, some respondents came up to me on campus and wanted to discuss certain issues in more detail. Such interactions often turned into longer conversations about their personal experiences and concerns, and laid the foundation for follow-up interviews. As I began to build a larger sample, I increasingly selected respondents based on the knowledge I had about their identities and biographies, prior to a more in-depth interview. On the one hand, I started to approach individuals who were recommended to me by somebody I had already interviewed. The benefit of this 'referral' or 'snowball' sampling method (Bryman 2012: 202) was that I made contact with several students whom I otherwise would never have met, as they rarely came to campus. Furthermore, I was able to draw on the details I had gathered as part of the campus survey about the participant's gender, caste/ ethnicity, and place of origin. I primarily relied on this kind of 'purpose sampling' (Babbie 2001: 190–191) for three reasons. First, it helped me to move beyond established circles of friends. Second, I was able to identify young people who belonged to more marginalised social groups and who consequently were in the minority also among the university students. Since I could not have identified these individuals based on appearance alone, I had to rely on the background information that I had collected about the survey respondents. Third, I could reach out to individuals who would have been unlikely to initiate contact for various reasons, including a lack of time, a degree of timidity, or the language barrier. For example, some of the students who had moved to Kathmandu more recently seemed to feel that they spoke insufficient English to engage in a longer conversation with me or perhaps knew too little about the Kathmandu context to be of any help to me. In such cases, my research assistant would make an initial phone call to lower the language barrier and explain in more detail the scope and objectives of the research project. Accordingly, the use of different sampling methods

proved to be valuable in negotiating existing power imbalances and ensuring that respondents were comfortable with being part of the research process.

Following this sampling strategy, I conducted and recorded interviews with a total of 50 individuals. However, I primarily rest my findings and interpretations on the conversations I had with 40 young people (see Table 2.2 for further details). These participants made sufficient time for me to gain in-depth insights into their lives. In some cases, we would arrange to meet for a whole day, during which we would engage in a discussion for several hours and I would be able to join the respondents in their daily routines. With other participants I met for shorter but more frequent conversations over the course of my fieldwork. In addition, these 40 participants openly shared with me how they perceived of a range of other people, including parents, siblings, neighbours, colleagues, or other members of their home communities. These conversations revealed much about young people's social networks and their relationships with others. This is not to say that these conversations allow for any conclusions about other people's opinions. But the ways in which other social actors are represented in young people's narratives disclose how young people try to trace and anticipate other people's perceptions and what difference this makes for young people's own ideas and actions.

In general, I deliberately described my research topic in rather broad terms, in order to allow my respondents to address issues specifically of concern to them, based on their own experiences and perceptions. While I had initially made some bullet points to serve as an interview guide – mainly to make it easier for my research assistant to facilitate the discussion – most of the conversations took the form of unstructured interviews. I primarily posed questions to initiate the conversation, seek further clarifications, or ask

Table 2.2 Overview of interviewees' social and geographical backgrounds

Gender	- 21 female - 19 male
Age range	- 21 to 36 years old - The large majority (32 out of 40) were between 23 and 27 years old.
Castes/ ethnicities	- Newar, Limbu, Rai, Tamang, Sherpa, Dalit, Brahmin and Chhetri - Upper castes (Brahmin and Chhetri) made up half of the sample.
Family status	- 26 single - 5 in a relationship - 9 married (of whom 3 had children)
Geographical background	- 18 had grown up within the urban Kathmandu Valley. - 22 came originally from semi-urban or rural parts of the country, covering all 5 regions of Nepal.

about a respondent's opinion on a certain point that had previously been raised elsewhere. Several respondents remarked that it must be hard to do this kind of research, considering that everybody had a different opinion. They then often tried to narrow down the scope of the research or identify questions they felt were relevant but missing. The advice they gave in this regard illustrates well the extent to which this research process was a collaborative production of knowledge (cf. McDowell 2010).

Focus group discussions

Towards the end of my fieldwork in Kathmandu, many of the respondents with whom I had been in contact over the previous six months repeatedly expressed their interest in the outcomes of my research. Since I felt that it was too early to say anything specific about the findings of my study, I instead invited them to join group meetings and to reflect together on some of the themes we had previously discussed in our individual conversations. With this purpose in mind, I would have liked to have included in the focus group discussions all of the 40 respondents whom I had previously interviewed individually. However, it was difficult to arrange a time that suited most participants. For this reason, I used 'opportunity sampling' (Brady 2006: 206–207) in order to best accommodate respondents' availabilities. In total, 13 research participants took part in one of the three sessions I organised during the final two months of my field research. The summary given in Table 2.3 shows that the participants came from various social and geographical backgrounds. This certainly fuelled the discussion but it did not raise any hostile tensions among the participants or lead to silencing dissenting opinions.

As part of the focus group discussions, we jointly explored multiple meanings that participants attached to key concepts underlying this study. Young people's personal

Table 2.3 Overview of focus group participants' social and geographical backgrounds

Gender	- 8 female - 5 male
Age range	- 23 to 28 years old
Castes/ ethnicities	- Newar, Limbu, Dalit, Brahmin and Chhetri
Family status	- 8 single - 2 in a relationship - 3 married (of whom 1 had a child)
Geographical background	- 7 had grown up within the urban Kathmandu Valley. - 6 came originally from other parts of the country.

experiences moved into the background of the discussion, and instead broader considerations of what they thought was the role of youth in Nepali society were brought into the centre of the conversation. In the course of the session, participants were asked to write down their ideas on sticky notes, which we then sought to map around keywords, such as 'youth' [*yuba*], 'future' [*bhabisya*] and 'destination' [*lakshya*[4]], displayed on a board that was visible to the whole group. In addition, participants were requested to introduce an 'imaginary friend', that is to describe a person whose life they thought represented the lives of many educated youth in Kathmandu. The discussions which evolved around these activities revealed important similarities in, and differences between, participants' opinions.

Furthermore, it was interesting for me to observe the demeanours of the participants in this group setting. While all the participants knew me well, they had not necessarily met each other before, even though they were all enrolled at the same campus. Furthermore, my role during the sessions was primarily that of a silent observer: my research assistant chaired the discussion. We also made the conscious decision to organise the meetings away from campus because we wanted to avoid a classroom-style atmosphere. These various choices may have contributed to the fact that some respondents, who had come across as rather shy in our individual conversations, turned out to be the more assertive participants in the discussion rounds. Such observations helped me to better account for the ways in which power imbalances and my positionality influenced the research process.

Nepali and English language

Basing my empirical analysis primarily on participants' verbal accounts meant that I was required to work in two foreign languages, namely English that I already spoke fluently and Nepali that I was just about to learn. It is important to note that for most respondents it was the other way around. This linguistic challenge certainly influenced the way in which I gathered as well as worked through the data.

In preparation for my fieldwork, I sought to acquire some basic Nepali language skills and participated in a one-month intensive language course for spoken Nepali at the South Asia Institute of the University of Heidelberg. When I arrived in Kathmandu a few weeks thereafter, I continued the language training with the same teacher on a weekly

[4] The direct translation of the English word 'destination' into Nepali is '*gantabya*'. The keywords used in the focus group, however, emerged from previous conversations with the participants, who explained that they associated the term '*lakshya*' with a future destination in terms of a goal or objective, rather than solely a physical place per se.

basis and relied on other learning resources for self-study.[5] Once I started going to the campus on a daily basis, I quickly noticed that the little textbook I carried with me proved to be a wonderful icebreaker. In particular, students, who otherwise were shy about talking to me because they felt they spoke insufficient English, would join me in a circle around the little booklet and help me go through the exercises and improve my pronunciation. This was a great way to demonstrate that I wanted to reach out to the students and learn their language rather than converse solely in English with them.

While Nepali was not necessarily the native language of all of my respondents, they all had a good command of the language and felt comfortable speaking Nepali. However, especially during more formal interviews, it was sometimes difficult to encourage respondents to speak Nepali rather than English. Having some knowledge of English is perceived to be an important marker of educational advancement and social status, particularly among the younger generation in Kathmandu (Liechty 2003, 2010). This affected the success of some of the earlier interviews, during which our interlocutors would continue speaking English, even though they struggled to express their thoughts in the foreign language and could only answer in monosyllables. Despite my and Sujata's efforts to pose our questions in Nepali, it was sometimes difficult to change the language of the conversation. One respondent afterwards frankly admitted that he had only wanted to talk to me because he never had spoken to a foreigner before and thought it would be a good opportunity to practise his English. As both Sujata and I became more experienced in conducting interviews, we quickly learned how to manoeuvre around the language barrier. In addition, I started to understand Nepali better and became less reliant on translations and clarifications, which allowed for a more natural flow of the conversation.

In addition to considerations regarding the respondents' preferences and my own language skills, the different modes of research also influenced the use of language. I kept records of more informal conversations by noting them down in my research diary in English. I digitally recorded 50 interviews, almost half of which were in Nepali and the remaining half either in a mixture of both Nepali and English or predominantly in English. The transcripts of all the recordings were made in English. Longer sections originally in Nepali were translated and transcribed by my research assistants. The discussions during the focus group sessions were exclusively in Nepali. Both my research assistant and I took notes during the sessions, which we then incorporated into a final discussion protocol in English. Because a significant share of the material was translated by my research assistants and myself – none of us being a trained translator or a native English speaker – I

[5] Particularly useful for me was the online resource 'Nepali: A Beginner's Primer Conversation and Grammar' developed by Cornell University in cooperation with the South Asia Language Resource Center at the University of Chicago. Available online: http://lrc.cornell.edu/nepali/online [Last accessed September 23, 2013]

chose not to concentrate on respondents' use of specific concepts during data analysis. In other words, I focused more on the wider ideas respondents sought to convey than on the exact terms they used to express themselves. Nonetheless, whenever quoting the respondents in this thesis, I indicate the source and level of accuracy using the following quotation system:[6]

- I use double quotation marks for quotes from digitally recorded interviews. I omit the quotation marks if I quote from an informal conversation that is only recorded in my research diary.
- I indicate which language the respondent originally used by putting N (for Nepali) or E (for English) in superscript at the beginning of the quote.
- Written material produced by the research participants themselves during the focus group discussions is presented in the original language, and – where necessary – an English translation is provided.

Data analysis

The research process is conventionally thought of as being structured into two major phases: fieldwork, followed by data analysis. This division rests on a distinction between 'the field' and 'home', and between the gathering and the writing up of information (Gupta and Ferguson 1997). The spatial and temporal structuring of these different research steps has, however, increasingly been challenged for being rather artificial (e.g. Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Katz 1994). In a similar vein, I found that data gathering and analysis were parallel and mutually reinforcing processes that did not start or stop with my change of location. While in Kathmandu I actively sought to discuss my ideas with my research assistants, friends, and local academics. In this context, the small discussion group that I initiated together with other doctoral researchers from Nepal and abroad provided an inspiring platform to present the progress of my work, and to seek others' advice on challenges as they arose. Data analysis for me was never solely a matter of reading, coding, and writing, but also of sharing, debating, and listening. These social exchanges helped me to think through and fine-tune my research approach over the course of the project.

I began transcribing the audio recordings shortly after I had started conducting interviews. My research assistants and I completed a significant part of the transcribing work during the one-month winter vacation in January 2012. The closure of the campus freed up some time to work on the transcripts and to meet individual respondents in

[6] Apart from slight modifications, I choose to follow the quotation systems used by Sherry Ortner (2003) in her book *New Jersey Dreaming*, and Amanda Gilbertson (2011) in her DPhil thesis *Within the Limits*.

different parts of the city. Reviewing the material half way through my fieldwork in this way helped me to then go back to respondents with more specific questions and to plan for the focus groups.

Towards the end of my time in Kathmandu I still could not help but feel slightly adrift in a sea of material that encompassed interview transcripts, field notes, photographs, newspaper articles, discussion protocols, brochures, and email correspondence – some of which was generated even after I had left Nepal. Coding the transcribed interviews using the software QSR NVivo 9 was the first step I took to engage with and link the copious and seemingly incoherent material. I approached coding through the lens of grounded theory, in that I did not start looking for specific concepts taken from the relevant literature, but instead generated a growing list of codes based on what was said by the respondents (see also Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). After coding ten interviews, I had accumulated an unsorted list of codes, including 'study is most important, first primary thing is study' or 'I might go back to the village' – literally using the words of the respondents as codes. Before continuing with the remaining 40 transcripts, I reviewed the existing codes and started to group them under overarching themes (e.g. 'education', 'work', and 'family'). I also kept separate codes referring to certain processes (e.g. 'preparing for the future'), young people's perceptions of self and others (e.g. 'those who are youth, but not us'), and coding filters (e.g. 'questions to me'). Progressing with the coding of the remaining transcripts, I continued adding new codes if the expressed idea did not fit into an existing code, or further subdivided codes that encompassed too many similar ideas. Coding the interview transcripts helped me to generate a list of key themes to which I then could link other materials, as well as to draft an initial outline of the thesis.

Positionality

On my first day on campus, I was accompanied by a member of the student union, Dhirendra, to whom I had been introduced by a common friend a few days earlier and who had agreed to show me around the campus and to introduce me to his peers and the administrative staff. I followed him to the different departments, greeting lecturers on our way and continuously shaking hands with students. Later that week, Dhirendra also took me to the office of the campus chief – though only after I had repeatedly requested him to do so, since he did not seem to attach much importance to a more formal introduction. I explained my intent to the vice president of the campus who asked me to submit a formal application letter. I was about to confirm that I would bring the necessary documents the following day, when the vice president ripped out a blank page from a notebook lying on

the desk in front of him and passed it Dhirendra, who wrote the place and date on top of the page and asked me to add a sentence about my research topic and my signature. I did as I was told. Dhirendra then passed the paper back to the vice president and said it was okay and that my request was approved.[7]

I choose to recall this little encounter here as it provides a good example of the different ways in which not only my own positionality, but also the positionality of the people with whom I became associated, influenced the research process. As a member of the student union, Dhirendra was perceived to be in a powerful position. This was made clear to me in a conversation with a group of students who pointed out that I had already met 'the chief of the campus', and hence should not be too worried about being formally introduced to the campus administration. Dhirendra was certainly a vital gatekeeper and a very resourceful contact person without whom it would have been much more difficult for me to commence my research project. At the same time, I was acutely aware that being directly associated with him could also have adverse effects. The majority of students either felt uneasy about or were utterly annoyed by student politics, and hence sought to avoid their politically active peers. It was therefore important for me to maintain a neutral standing in terms of party politics, which I managed to do by developing a cordial but also sporadic contact with Dhirendra and other student politicians.

This balancing act also influenced my choice regarding a research assistant – another vital person with whom I was closely associated on campus. I was careful to look for somebody who was not affiliated to any political student organisation. At the same time, I was committed to working with a student from within the campus community rather than bringing in a possibly more experienced person from outside the institution, considering that respondents were likely to feel more at ease with 'somebody of their own kind'. Sujata was a young Chhetri woman in her mid-twenties and about to complete a master's degree in sociology and anthropology. Being already familiar with the work of Nepal scholars such as Mark Liechty (2003) and Lynn Bennett (1983), Sujata quickly picked up on my research strategy. Working with Sujata at the beginning of my fieldwork was crucial to establishing a good rapport with the students and to gaining insights into the dynamics on campus. For the last two months of my fieldwork, I had to find a replacement for Sujata, as her final exams were approaching and she was unable to commit more time to the research project. Rajju, an upper-caste Newar woman in her late twenties, assisted me in transcribing the remaining interviews in Nepali and in organising focus group discussions with research participants whom I previously had interviewed

[7] This 'application procedure' should not be mistaken for my official application for a research permit, in the course of which I registered with the Centre of International Relations at TU and obtained approval for my research project from the Ministry of Education and the Department of Immigration.

individually. By that time my respondents had got to know me well and therefore it required little effort to bring Rajju on board. Both Sujata and Rajju further contributed to this study through our many discussions, allowing me to reflect on the progress of the research, to critically verify underlying assumptions and emerging findings, and to acquire a better understanding of the wider social and cultural context.

I also sought to understand how my own positionality could possibly both facilitate as well as delimit the interactions with my respondents, and how to balance these effects. As a foreigner of Western appearance, I attracted a certain degree of attention and interest on campus. Students would often approach me, keen to learn more about my project and home country. Such initial encounters made it easier for me to arrange more structured interviews during which respondents then also felt more comfortable discussing more personal or sensitive issues. Because I was more or less the same age as my respondents, they did not find it odd for me to join them in gatherings with their friends and in other activities within as well as outside the campus environment. Furthermore, being female facilitated my aim of basing my study on interviews with young people of both genders. Most of the interviews I conducted on campus took place either in an empty classroom or outside on the grass, but generally out of sight of passers-by. In this way, I wanted to avoid interruptions and allow for a confidential conversation. If either my research assistant or I had been male, most of the female respondents would have felt uncomfortable in such a secluded setting and would have found it socially unacceptable to stay behind and to meet with us after classes had finished. In a group of young females such concerns, however, did not arise. While I assume that my male respondents possibly discussed different topics with me than they would have with a male counterpart, they never appeared to feel uneasy in the presence of myself or Sujata. Nevertheless, I checked regularly with Sujata prior to the meeting as to whether a particular interview setting and my conduct were culturally appropriate.

In other contexts, my positionality and the power imbalances inherent in social interactions played out in ways that were sometimes hard for me to fully anticipate in advance. My initial research strategy had been based on the idea of involving the students in the project as co-researchers rather than as informants. After all, they were all studying for an academic degree – just like me – and hence probably had their own ideas about what it means to do research. I had therefore expected that students would be keen to take the production of knowledge into their own hands: for example, by creating a photo diary and jointly organising discussion groups in the form of a workshop. After a few failed attempts – partly because they simply lacked the time, but certainly also because they attached a very high status to the PhD and therefore expected me to take the lead – I had to drop some of my initial ideas and revert to more formal interviews. At other times, the

power relations between me and my respondents worked out in reverse (see also McDowell 2010; Mullings 1999). I had been prepared for requests regarding financial assistance or job opportunities, but was still surprised by the sometimes very insisting and pressing demands of a few, usually male, individuals. Since I felt at unease and rather exposed in such situations, I became more cautious with regard to the details I disclosed about my own identity and background. This kind of strategic self-representation and its ethical implications requires further consideration.

Research ethics

In order to avoid and resolve ethical dilemmas reflecting on my conduct and the potential implications of the research for the participants became an integral part of my work.[8] As Priscilla Alderson and Virginia Morrow (2011: 5) point out: "ethical questions are woven through every aspect of research, shaping the methods and findings". For this reason, I have addressed a number of ethical considerations at various points throughout this chapter. I nevertheless include, here, a separate section on research ethics for two reasons. First, I want to discuss in more detail aspects related to anonymity and confidentiality, and make transparent exactly what the participants consented to. Second, I want to elaborate further on issues of reciprocity, because I sometimes struggled to find an appropriate answer to some of the challenges underlying the question of 'giving back', and because I continue to debate some of these issues with respect to the dissemination of the research outcomes.

Informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity

I quickly learned that it would take several steps for me to obtain respondents' informed consent: that is, to make sure that respondents were properly informed and free to opt in or out of the research project at any stage (ESRC 2010: 29). This became evident to me after I repeatedly encountered students and other Nepalis telling me: "Oh, you won't have any problems. The management will easily allow you access and everybody here will be eager to help you, because you are a foreigner." This raised a number of questions for me. Even if 'the management' agreed to facilitate the study, how could I be sure that the students who studied on campus consented to my presence and observations on campus? Moreover, if classmates assumed that everybody was equally keen to interact with me, would individual students 'dare' to opt out?

[8] On a formal level, the research design was reviewed and approved by the university's ethics committee (CUREC) prior to the pilot study, in March 2011.

In a first step, I sought to address these questions by widely circulating information among the student community about the purpose of my research, the time frame, and the next steps. As mentioned earlier, the survey proved to be a vital tool for this purpose. Indeed, I was relieved to see that about 50 students chose to return an empty questionnaire. I repeatedly cross-checked informed consent as I proceeded with the study. During the pilot study, I initially asked respondents for their consent in written form, but quickly swapped to oral consent because I noticed that signing an official form significantly reinforced existing power imbalances and tended to place respondents in an awkward position. In my later fieldwork I therefore always explained again to my respondents what the study entailed, and that Sujata and I would treat any information about their identity as confidential. I also always asked for the respondents' permission before digitally recording conversations. Aware of potential peer-pressure, I generally avoided approaching prospective respondents in front of their classmates, and instead preferred to contact them after class hours on their mobile phones to ask whether they would like to meet for individual interviews. On a few occasions, respondents came along with a friend to our meetings. While I was unable to fully account for confidentiality in these situations, it would have been culturally insensitive to ask for the other person to leave. Besides, the interactions between the two respondents were often of benefit to the discussion.

I initially told my respondents that I would protect their identity by using pseudonyms when writing about our encounters. Later, when I was reviewing the material, I realised that pseudonyms might not be sufficient to ensure certain individuals remained anonymous. For example, there were only a few Dalits studying on the campus, and other respondents could potentially be identified based on combined information about their educational and occupational backgrounds. I therefore chose to not disclose the name and exact location of the campus. Furthermore, I refer to the same person with different pseudonyms, in order to avoid a person being identified based on a combined reading of the various quotes included in this thesis.[9]

Reciprocity

An article published in one of Kathmandu's English dailies in 2013 sparked anew the debate about the lack of reciprocity between Western academics and their Nepali counterparts (Sharrock 2013). To what extent do foreign researchers engage with the work of Nepali scholars? And to what extent are research outcomes eventually made

[9] For guidance on anonymisation, I referred to the best practice guide published by the university's ethics committee (CUREC). Available online: https://www1.admin.ox.ac.uk/curec/oxonly/guidelines/ [Last accessed September 27, 2013]

accessible to Nepalis? These are some of the questions which the author – himself a Western scholar based in Kathmandu – raises in the article, and which also preoccupied me both during fieldwork as well as afterwards.

I perhaps found better answers for some questions than for others. While in Kathmandu I actively sought input from the local academic community, and before leaving Nepal I took the opportunity to present my work at Martin Chautari, a Kathmandu-based research and policy institute. However, finding an appropriate way to 'give back' to my research participants appeared to be the bigger challenge. While I strove to base our interactions on mutual trust and reciprocity, there were occasions where I felt ambivalent about freely disclosing information about myself (cf. Mullings 1999). In general, I had no hesitation to answer respondents' questions about my home country, family, or educational experiences. However, I became more reluctant to disclose details about my financial means, especially after having been confronted with persisting requests by individual students for monetary assistance. For example, I tended to mention only that I was studying at a British university, without specifying Oxford – unless I was asked for the name of the institution. Even though I did so to some extent unconsciously, it is debatable whether selective self-representation is ethical (see also Mullings 1999). In particular, I was concerned that I asked respondents a lot of personal details, without necessarily opening up to them in the same way. At the same time, I agree with Beverly Mullings (1999: 344) in that in any case I, as the researcher, had only limited control over how I was perceived, because there is always a "multiplicity of [...] meanings attached to a researcher's body". Still in search of a proper way to 'give something back' and to express my sincere thanks to the campus community at large, I donated several books listed among students' reading requirements to the campus library before leaving Nepal at the beginning of April 2012. I hope that in this way I managed to provide some support to students from across the different departments and courses.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed in detail my research process, reflecting on the decisions I took regarding the selection of participants, research setting, field methods, data usage and dissemination of findings. These decisions were primarily guided by my specific research objective to contribute to a fuller understanding of the concept of agency based on an analysis of young people's time-space-strategies for the future. At the same time, however, these decisions need to be understood in the light of the power dynamics and representation strategies which shaped the social interactions between all those who contributed to the process of knowledge production in this study.

By reflecting on and making transparent the way in which I interacted with educated young people in Kathmandu and used the information I acquired, I sought to verify that the analysis and interpretations presented in the empirical chapters of this thesis are based on sufficiently in-depth insights. Which stories and quotations were included in the written output, of course, remains my sole responsibility. However, discussing my work with Nepali friends and scholars, and frequently going back to the 'raw' material while writing up my argument, served as critical reality checks and helped to establish certainty with respect to the claims I make. I strive to present my ideas here in a transparent, coherent and communicable manner (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003: 83), and hope that I offer an account of young people's lives in Kathmandu with which my respondents themselves might easily identify.

CHAPTER THREE

Preparing for the future

Contextualising Nepal's educated youth

The young Nepalis who feature in this study were, for the most part, born during the mid-1980s. The first three decades of their lives came to be seen as one of the most turbulent times in the history of the country. During this period, Nepali society witnessed the downfall of the autocratic monarchy and the re-establishment of a multiparty democracy under a constitutional monarchy in 1990. After 1996, the country was plunged into a decade-long civil war, which resulted in the abolition of the monarchy and the announcement of a republic in 2008. Since then, however, the promulgation of a new constitution has been repeatedly delayed, generating high levels of uncertainty with regard to Nepal's political future.[10] These changes in the political space also significantly affected the country's educational and economic landscape. Formal education is no longer the privilege of the urban elite, but has become accessible to larger sections of society. New technologies, such as mobile phones and the internet, have entered the daily lives of Kathmandu's urban society, offering new means to connect to the outside world. Long-distance migration has become an important livelihood strategy of Nepalis from across the society. These developments tend to raise hopes for a new and different future but they also cause much uncertainty, as long-established life paths seem to become increasingly irrelevant, or at least more obscured.

Several researchers working in Nepal in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s have been centrally concerned with how the country's younger population has been affected by and has responded to these structural changes (e.g. Ahearn 2001a; Liechty 2003; Madsen and Carney 2011; Pigg 1992; Skinner 1990; Snellinger 2010; Valentin 2005). Their contributions suggest that the political, economic, and social transformations witnessed by

[10] At the time of writing this thesis, Nepal's political leaders were still in the process of deciding the future political direction of the country. The Constituent Assembly, elected in 2008, was dissolved in May 2012 without having promulgated a new constitution. Elections for a new Constituent Assembly took place in November 2013. While it is perhaps too early to say anything specific about the country's political future, several contributors to Nepali studies have sought to analyse and outline the underlying motives and agendas of the political actors involved (e.g. Gellner 2014; Hachhethu and Gellner 2010; International Crisis Group 2012; Shneiderman and Tillin 2014).

Nepali society during the past three decades have significantly changed the experience and meaning of youth. Previously, there was less of a sense that the life cycle was arranged around distinct developmental stages. In most Nepali communities, it was common for children to accept responsibilities associated with adulthood at an early age, especially where people's livelihoods depended on subsistence farming. In this context, the Nepali scholar Dor Bahadur Bista (1991: 69) explicitly writes that life in Nepal was "a single continuum with no apparent disjuncture between childhood, youth, and adulthood". Only upper castes, including some Newar Hindus[11], have long distinguished between children and adults. In the tradition of these communities, male and female initiation rituals are seen to mark a young person's transition to adulthood and acceptance as a full member of the community (Bennett 1983). Whilst such ceremonies are still performed in Nepal to date and perhaps have even gained in importance as a stage to demonstrate the family's social status, they have little to do with the construction of youth as a social category in contemporary Nepal (Michaels 2004: 98–99). The term 'youth' [*yuba*], in fact, only gained currency in political and developmental discourses during the second half of the twentieth century. In the case of Nepal, the social construct of youth therefore constitutes a modern concept and, as Amanda Snellinger (2013: 75) asserts, one which cannot be directly linked to any of the multiple cultural traditions found within Nepal.

In this chapter I take a closer look at the emergence of the social category of youth against the backdrop of the large-scale transformations witnessed by Nepali society during the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing on existing literature on Nepal, I trace the structural forces which have shaped the lives of Nepalis born during the mid-1980s. In particular, I discuss how the lives of these young people may compare with those of previous generation of Nepalis. The weight of evidence suggests that the lives of Nepal's younger generation take place under markedly different circumstances than those of their parents. These generational differences notwithstanding, culturally embedded values and ideas of what constitutes a successful future life are passed on from one generation to the next. This chapter therefore sets a starting point for my empirical analysis of young people's future orientations, in that it situates their lives within the history of the modern Nepali state and its ties to regional and global developments.

[11] It should be noted that Newars, whether Hindu or Buddhist, maintain their own caste/ occupational hierarchy. The social order of the Newars is similar to the Hindu system and was also incorporated in the Nation's Code of 1854, known as the Muluki Ain, which is believed to be the root of Nepal's law system (Höfer 1979; Nepali 1965).

The production of educated youth

The modern education system in Nepal is one of the youngest in the world. Under the authoritarian rule of the Ranas (1846-1951) the establishment of a formal education system was actively discouraged and only a limited number of schools were set up to educate the children of the ruling elite. When the country opened up to foreign aid after the fall of the Rana oligarchy in 1951, Hugh B. Wood, an Oregon educator who was in Nepal from 1953 to 1962 as an advisor for national education planning, reported that there were only about 100 primary schools across the whole country, six secondary schools (four of which were located in the capital city), and one small college (Wood 1959: 429). However, particularly since the 1980s, the number of students enrolled within the formal education system has increased rapidly (Mathema 2007). At primary school level (grade one to five) numbers grew from around 400,000 in 1971 to over 6.2 million in 2011. Over the same period, the combined numbers in lower secondary and secondary schools (grade six to ten) increased from 120,000 to over five million. At post-secondary level, including grade 11 and 12 and tertiary education, numbers increased from 17,000 in 1971 to 1.7 million in 2011 (see also Figure 3.1).[12] These figures indicate that those Nepalis born during the mid-1980s belong to the first generation of Nepalis for whom formal education has become more easily accessible.

The achievements made in terms of enrolment numbers need to be understood within the context of the political and social transformations that made it possible to establish a system of mass education in Nepal. According to the first national education plan (1956-1961), universal primary education was supposed to be achieved by 1985 (Bhatta 2009). However, within the set time frame, attempts to increase access and retention rates in formal education fell markedly short of this target. In 1991, less than half of the country's population aged 15 to 24 years was reported to be literate.[13] One of the reasons for this slow progress was the significant degree of social stratification in Nepal. From primary school level onwards, educational discrepancies essentially ran along gender and caste/ ethnic lines and also cut through the country's geographical regions (e.g. Ahearn 2001a; Graner 1998; Stash and Hannum 2001). As a consequence of these discrepancies, many of those Nepalis born before the 1980s either never had the opportunity to go to school or were forced to discontinue their studies at a lower level of the education system.

[12] For the enrolment figures for 1971, I refer to a paper by Kedar B. Mathema (2007: 46). The enrolment figures for 2011 were retrieved from the report on the national census 2011 (CBS 2012: 235 Table 26).

[13] The youth (15-24) literacy rate was retrieved from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics online database. Available online: http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/ReportFolders/ReportFolders.aspx [Last accessed November 1, 2012]

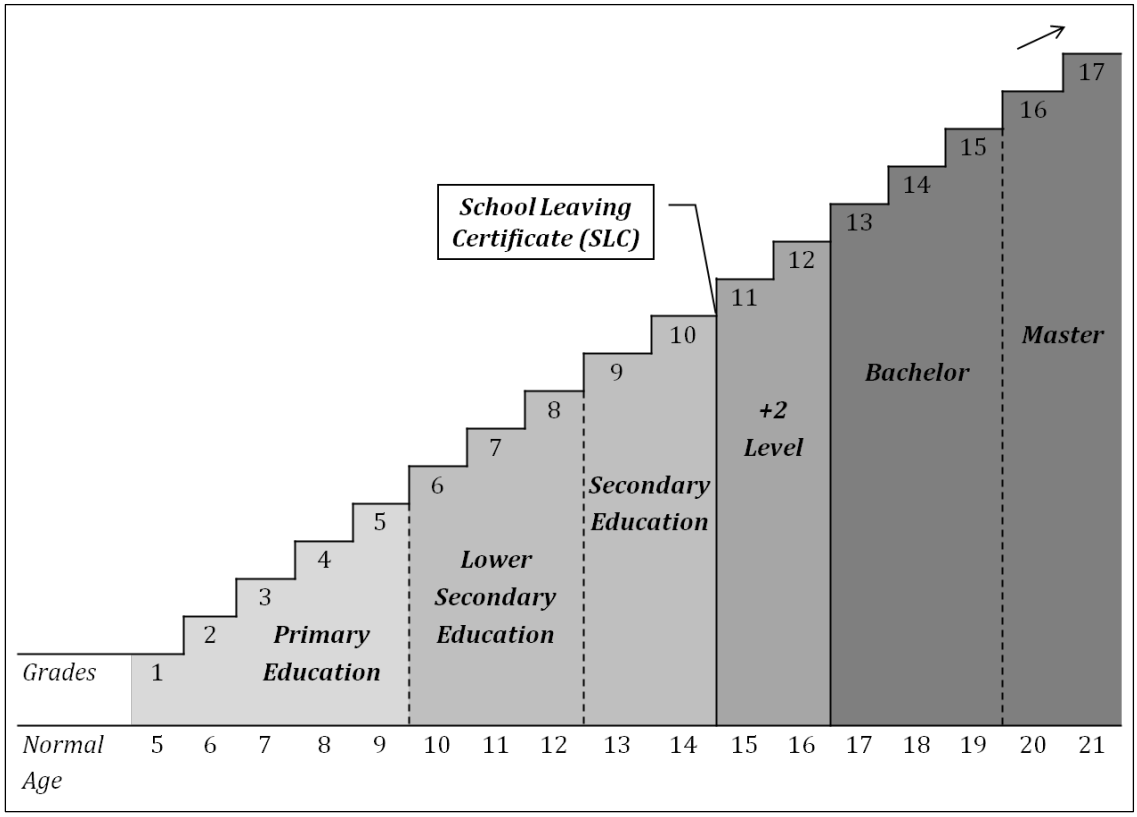

Figure 3.1 Structure of the formal education system in Nepal. (Adapted from UNESCO (2006))

Tertiary education, in particular, remained for long the privilege of the urban elite in Kathmandu. The provision of higher education in Nepal dates back to 1918, when TriChandra College was founded by Chandra Shamsher, the fifth prime minister of the Rana dynasty. The main purpose of establishing a college, which was based in Kathmandu but affiliated with the university in Calcutta, was to allow Nepal's political elite to take Indian university exams without being exposed to the independence movement in India (Whelpton 2005: 83). In 1947, however, several university students dared to openly criticise the Ranas for limiting the curriculum to Sanskrit only. The Ranas responded to the students' demands by endorsing further repressive measures. As a result, many students who had participated in organised protests against the ruling regime were forced to go into exile to India (Snellinger 2005). While in India, the exiles organised themselves in political parties and started a revolution which put an end to the Ranas' rule in 1951. After the change in the country's political leadership, invigorated efforts to modernise the Nepali state led to the foundation of Nepal's first university in 1959 (TU 1996). But also in the decades following the establishment of TU, access to higher education continued to be unequally distributed across society. A survey of 804 university graduates who obtained their degrees between 1974 and 1981 shows that half of them were from the Kathmandu

Valley and 85 per cent of them belonged to upper castes, namely Brahmin, Chhetri, and Newar (Kayastha 1985: 25–40). The same study also reveals that less than one fifth of the graduates were women (ibid.: 26). To some extent, these educational inequalities still persist to date at university level.

In the 1980s, a new middle class started to emerge in Kathmandu and with it the demand for quality education grew significantly. In particular at the level of higher education, enrolment numbers increased rapidly in the 1980s (Sijapati 2005: 26). Being the only university in the country at that time, TU increasingly struggled to cope with intensified pressure regarding admission. The ruling regime and the international donor community, therefore, sought to reorient post-secondary education along more vocational lines, and to introduce more selective admission procedures for university. These reform plans, however, were strongly opposed by the students. The large majority of them were part of Kathmandu's new middle class, for which an academic education was a question of social prestige or even a kind of 'ideology' (see Liechty 2003: 215). The reform plans of the government, however, were seen to put up new barriers to obtain a university education and hence threatened to undermine the possibility of urban middle-class youth to reproduce and enhance their social standing. (Whelpton 2005: 126). What started off as campus-based protests against the new education policy eventually grew into the democratic movement against the Panchayat regime, a 'party-less' system which concentrated the ruling power in the hands of the monarch and which had been in place since 1960. At the movement's peak, an estimated half million people participated in public protests organised in the centre of Kathmandu (Hoftun et al. 1999: 131; Snellinger 2005). Finally, in 1990, this mass movement succeeded in overthrowing the Panchayat regime.

The new government sought to distance itself from the former regime by explicitly recognising Nepal's social diversity, which in turn directly translated into policies for improved educational equity (e.g. Bhatta 2011; Caddell 2007; Valentin 2005). As one of its first international agreements, the government signed the declaration of the World Conference on Education for All in 1990. Over the next decade, several educational reforms were launched with the financial and technical support of numerous international donor organisations. These initiatives yielded some positive results in terms of construction of schools, teacher training, and the development of new learning materials, which greatly improved access to, and the quality of, primary school education (Khaniya and Williams 2004). However, problems remained with regard to student performance, since a comparatively low number of students completed primary education and continued to secondary school (Khaniya and Williams 2004).

Such persisting constraints affected in particular those young people who grew up outside Nepal's urban centres. In the mid-1990s, it was only within the Kathmandu Valley that the majority of the young population (aged 6 to 14 years) completed five years of primary schooling (Graner 1998: 208). However, in most of the others districts, students often did not progress beyond grade three. Girls, in particular, struggled to enrol and to stay in school. In some districts in the western and far-western parts of Nepal only one out of five primary schoolchildren was a girl (ibid.: 202). Even in more recent years, geographical disparities continue to be highly visible with regard to students' performance. In 2003, which was approximately the year when most of my respondents completed secondary school, pass rates in the exams for the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) were as low as 16.4 per cent in more remote areas and generally remained below 50 per cent across the whole country (Bhatta 2004: 313 Table 3.2). Only in the Kathmandu Valley did over 70 per cent of the students successfully complete the tenth grade examination (ibid.). Thus, for many young Nepalis, educational success was not something that could be easily taken for granted, and thus continued to be seen as a sign of social distinction and something to bolster one's sense of self-worth.

In this context, it has been argued that the mobilisation around formal education in Nepal gave rise to new social categories, according to which the 'educated' youth was to be distinguished from the 'uneducated' and generally older population (Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). It was commonly believed that modern schooling equipped a person with more than literacy and numeracy skills: schools represented a crucial site for the formation of values and attitudes, and taught young people about the role they were expected to play in wider society. What exactly it meant to be an 'educated' person, however, depended greatly on the interpretations and intentions of the political system which was currently in power.

The Panchayat regime sought to promote its vision of national unity for which the slogan '*ek bhasa, ek bhesh, ek desh'* (meaning 'one language, one dress, one nation') became emblematic (e.g. Caddell 2007). Schools constituted an important site for the indoctrination of a national culture which was based on the traditions and values of the upper-caste ruling elites from the Kathmandu Valley and the surrounding hills (Onta 1996). Nepali was promoted as the language of instructions in schools across the whole country. Portraits of the king and queen were displayed in school premises and on the first pages of textbooks. Singing the national anthem represented a fixed part of children's school routine. As a Nepali sociologist later reasoned, educational policies during the Panchayat regime aimed to "implant a vigorous and forceful patriotism among the youth" (Shah 1993: 9). Some of these school practices, which largely undermined Nepal's

linguistic and ethnic diversity, were only abolished towards the end of the civil war in the early 2000s (Lind Petersen 2011; Shields and Rappleye 2008b).

With the reinstallation of a multiparty system in 1990, discourses about the modernisation and development of the country found a strong articulation in the national school curriculum (e.g. Pigg 1992; Skinner and Holland 1996). Children's textbooks now included images of young people engaged in various social initiatives, such as planting trees or cleaning a temple courtyard (Caddell 2007; Gellner 2004). The international donor institutions which supported the development and publication of school materials also left their mark by including issues related to children's rights, poverty reduction, health, and environmental protection in the national school curriculum (Caddell 2007: 23). The 'educated' person came to be seen as somebody who was well behaved, served the country's development, held a salaried job, and could access a range of information and knowledge (Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). 'Uneducated' people, by contrast, were said to be stuck in the 'traditional' and 'conservative' way of life which revolved around obsolete beliefs and the daily struggle to make a living (Skinner and Holland 1996: 283). These developmental discourses further manifested the idea that formal education was perhaps the most promising route to upward social mobility and a more comfortable life in the future.

A new vision for the country's education system was also put forward by the Maoists, who likewise sought to promote their political goals through school-based activities. In February 1996, the Maoists presented their demands for state reforms concerning 'nationality', 'democracy', and 'livelihood', in the form of a memorandum to the national government. Among the 40 points listed was the right to mother tongue education, universal education, and the closure of all for-profit schools (Shields and Rappleye 2008a; Thapa and Sijapati 2003). The government's failure to respond to these demands provided the catalyst for the Maoists to declare the 'People's War' in 1996. The civil war was to last for an entire decade, at times severely disrupting young people's daily lives. Particularly in places located away from district headquarters, public schools often represented the only state institution (Lind Petersen 2011; Sharma 2004). This put schools into a perilous position, with the result that a disproportionately high number of teachers were killed and entire school classes were forced to join the armed forces (Shields and Rappleye 2008a; Thapa and Sijapati 2003). Consequently, security concerns prompted many families from the conflict-affected regions of Nepal to send their children away or to migrate with them to the country's urban centres, with Kathmandu often being the final destination (A. Ghimire 2010; Poertner, Junginger, and Müller-Böker 2011). Schools in the urban centres were also adversely affected by frequent strikes and were forced to close for extensive periods – in some areas, for more than 200 days a year

(Amnesty International 2005; see also Shneiderman and Turin 2004). After years of disruption and precariousness, the signing of the peace agreement in 2006 finally put an end to 238 years of monarchy and gave rise to new hopes for a more stable and prosperous future.

The realisation of this grand future vision is thought to lie primarily in the hands of the newly educated younger generation. The vision of youth as a source of hope for a more prosperous and a more socially just future has been promoted by both national leaders and international actors involved in processes of peace-building and planned development. Alongside these public debates about the potential of educated youth, successes in raising enrolment rates even at higher levels of the education system give reason to believe that it is possible to build a better future for Nepali society. Following the restoration of peace in 2006, there has been a rapid increase in national gross enrolment rates at the post-secondary school level[14] from a mere five per cent in 2003/ 2004 (CBS 2004: 76 Table 5.16) to 17 per cent in 2010/ 2011 (CBS 2011: 96 Table 5.15). Within the urban Kathmandu Valley, gross enrolments rates at tertiary level have been reported to be even as high as 66 per cent in recent years. These figures, however, tend to hide the fact that 'educated' youth continue to primarily represent more privileged groups of Nepali society. Estimates suggest that more than 80 per cent of the students enrolled at tertiary level in recent years came from the wealthiest fifth of Nepal's population (Sijapati 2005: 28–29). In comparison, only six per cent were from the poorest half and just 0.4 per cent of all students from the poorest fifth of households. From this perspective, the argument that enhanced access is not on a par with equal access seems to hold true in the case of Nepal (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

The emergence of a modern labour market

Since the 1950s, the promises made by the country's political leaders have frequently raised expectations among the Nepali people for economic growth and better standards of living. Available statistics, however, indicate that such expectations remain largely unfulfilled. Economic growth rates, which on average were under 4.5 per cent per annum between 1976 and 2013, have been highly volatile and low in comparison with other South Asian countries.[15] Due to a high population growth rate, per capita income increased

[14] The tertiary gross enrolment rate is defined as the ratio of the total number of students enrolled at higher education institutions, irrespective of their age, to the total number of people aged 18 to 23 years (CBS 2011: 83).

[15] Growth rates of real GDP were retrieved from the Economic Survey conducted by the Ministry of Finance on an annual basis. For growth rates between 2002 and 2013, I refer to the Economic Survey published in 2014 (MoF 2014: xvii). Growth rates between 1976 and 2002 were retrieved from various issues of the Economic Survey (as cited in Shrestha 2005: 63).

at an even lower rate of two per cent per annum (Khare and Slany 2011). If this growth rate remains constant, Nepal would need an additional 31 years to arrive at the level at which Bangladesh was in 2007 (ADB 2009).

Apart from political instabilities, longstanding structural problems are often cited as a cause for Nepal's slow economic progress. The overwhelming majority of Nepali people live and work in rural areas and many of them are subsistence farmers. Even though employment rates in the agricultural sector have declined over the past 30 years, it is estimated that more than three-quarters of the country's population still derive their livelihood from agricultural production (Khare and Slany 2011: 17). But it has become increasingly difficult to make a living from the land. Besides being highly dependent on the weather conditions, and especially on the monsoon rains, most farmers have to cope with lower yields and shrinking landholdings. In part, this is because of partition of inheritance, but also because families often decide to sell parts of their property in order to clear debts. Only a small fraction of the rural population owns sufficient land to be able to live by commercial farming. These richer agriculturists generally belong to the upper strata of caste/ ethnic groups, which at some point in history received land grants from the aristocracy for religious (Brahmin), military (Magar or Gurung), and administrative services (Chhetri) (Regmi 1978). For the vast majority of farmers, however, it has become increasingly necessary to rent (additional) land or work as wage labourers (see also Graner 2001). Productivity rates in the agricultural sector, which historically has been the backbone of Nepal's economy, have consistently been in decline for the past five decades (Sharma 2006). In recent years, agricultural production contributed no more than 35 per cent to GDP (ADB 2013; Khare and Slany 2011).

Initially, the emergence of new industries within in the periphery of the capital city promised to provide much-needed employment opportunities for the many unskilled and semi-skilled workers who left behind the fields and came to the country's urban centre in search of a better livelihood. In particular, the carpet and garment industry expanded rapidly during the export boom in the early 1990s (Graner 2001; Shakya 2004). After some profitable years, however, exports started to decline as problems concerning low wages, poor working conditions, and child labour in Kathmandu's manufacturing sector were made public (Graner 2001). In the aftermath of the civil war, several factors continue to hamper the development of an industrial sector in Nepal. On the one hand, many infrastructural problems, including frequent electricity cuts and fuel shortages, remain unsolved (ADB 2013). On the other hand, private investors, especially those of upper-caste or Indian origin, were increasingly put under pressure by the Maoists and associated trade unions (Shakya 2010). As a result, the manufacturing industry – which at its height employed up to half a million people – has been largely dismantled (Shakya 2004).

The economic sector that has grown fastest since the 1950s is the tertiary sector. Located along trans-Himalayan trade routes, the Kathmandu Valley has been an important administrative and commercial centre in the region for many centuries. During the second half of the twentieth century, however, tertiary activities grew and diversified significantly. After the downfall of the Ranas' regime, the new government adopted an 'open door' policy which led to an influx of foreign goods, the arrival of diplomatic missions in Kathmandu, and a rapid integration of the country into the system of international aid. In the following decades, Nepal became a kind of 'development laboratory' for the international donor community (Skerry, Moran, and Calavan 1991). Many of the foreigners involved in the development programmes launched in the 1950s and 1960s thought it to be a unique opportunity to work in Nepal, because the country had never been colonised and remained relatively insignificant in political terms during the period of the Cold War (Fujikura 1996). Thus, Nepal became one of the favourite sites for foreign experts to put into practice what they thought were the best approaches to planned development. The financial and technical assistance that the international donor community has provided to Nepal since the 1950s is worth several billions of US dollars.[16] Since the early 1990s, changes in governmental policies regarding the fundamental right to organise have resulted in an unprecedented growth in non-governmental activities: available figures suggest that between 1990 and 2008, the number of NGOs registered in Nepal grew from a few hundred to over 20,000 (Shakya 2009: 111). Based on research in the workings of NGOs in Nepal, Celayne Heaton Shrestha (2002, 2010a) has shown that the non-governmental sector has become associated with a whole range of financial and social benefits, which are hard to find in any other segment of Nepal's labour market. In view of the incentives associated with institutionalised forms of social service [*samāj sevā*], several scholars have argued that a 'development industry' (Sijapati Basnett 2012) has emerged around the work ethos of serving the country: partner NGOs, Nepali academics working as consultants, and government officials in charge of 'managing' development projects at various levels all try to tap into the enormous amount of aid money flowing into the country (Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari 2011; Liechty 2003; Sijapati Basnett 2012).

At the same time, Nepal's government apparatus, which previously had been merely an instrument of feudal rule, developed into a modern bureaucracy. Between 1951 and 1973, approximately 43,000 additional posts in the civil service were created (Skerry et al. 1991: 188). The proliferation of government agencies (e.g. the police, the army, and public

[16] Estimates suggest that between 1951 and 1997 Nepal received a total amount of three billion USD in foreign aid (on average about 92 million per year) (as cited in Joshi 1997). This number has further increased in more recent years. For the fiscal year 2010/ 2011 alone, total foreign aid committed was reported to be 1.66 billion USD (MoF 2011).

schools) and the establishment of state enterprises further contributed to an increase in white-collar jobs. Many of those Nepalis, who managed to attain higher levels of education in the 1970s and 1980s, embarked on a career in the public sector, not least because the government was the only employer in Nepal that paid retirement benefits. After decades of expansion and centralisation of government activities, the international donor community called on the Nepali state to reduce the role of the government in the economy and to increase the role of private enterprises (Skerry et al. 1991). While reform efforts to privatise public enterprises and to cut state subsidies already started in the mid-1980s, they were only accelerated after the abolition of the Panchayat regime and the reinstallation of a multiparty democracy in 1990.

Since the 1990s, political efforts have been stepped up to move Nepal's economy towards a more liberalised and open structure. On the demand side, the primary aim was to reduce government consumption and contain fiscal deficits, which led to a wave of reductions in state subsidies and enhanced efforts to mobilise private investments. Restructuring measures on the supply side included tax reforms, the liberalisation of the financial system, and the removal of restrictions on international trade. The impact of economic liberalisation on various industries has been mixed. With tariff reforms, a downward revision in sales tax on imports, and the removal of quantitative restrictions on foreign commodities, the level of protection for the local manufacturing industry has been drastically cut down (Acharya 2000). At the same time, imports have consistently increased, as Nepal became further integrated in the world economy. Nepal's industrial basis, however, proves to be too weak to compete on the international market, which also shows in the trade balance: In 2011, exports accounted for only 12 per cent of GDP, while imports rose to 35 per cent of GDP (Khare and Slany 2011: 33).

In contrast to the manufacturing industry, the service sector has recorded significant gains since the 1990s. The private education sector took a particularly rapid development. In the past, government funds had proven to be insufficient to meet the growing demand for quality education, with the result that, during the state-centralised system of the Panchayat regime, much needed financial resources had been channelled into private schools outside the country (Whelpton 2005: 167). For this reason, national and international policymakers were in favour of promoting the privatisation of education (Bhatta 2011; Sijapati 2005). Already in the 1980s, the state-run university had started to provide affiliations to 140 private and community colleges. After 1990, the private education sector grew exponentially, with the result that by 2011/ 2012 the number of affiliated colleges had reached 826 in total.[17] In addition, three new universities were

[17] For the number of affiliate colleges I refer to the statistics published on the web page of the university during the academic year 2011/ 2012. Available online: http://tribhuvan-university.edu.np/about-us/ [Last accessed July 25, 2012]

founded post-1990: one private university in the Kathmandu Valley and two community-funded universities in urban centres outside the valley. In the finance sector, the removal of entry barriers to foreign capital and to the domestic private sector resulted in a similar rapid expansion. Until 1984, only two government-owned commercial banks were operating in the market (Acharya 2003). In 2012, the country's finance sector numbered 32 commercial banks, 88 development banks, 70 finance companies, and numerous cooperatives offering small-scale banking services (Gundewar 2012). The media sector, which until 1990 had been under the control of the state, grew enormously in terms of both quantity and quality in the following decades. In this context, several scholars have noted that the emergence of an independent media sector and the improvements made regarding the availability and use of information and communication technology is a huge achievement not only as regards the country's economic development. But it has also been a crucial step towards democracy (Onta 2001, 2009; Shields 2011; Wilmore 2008).

Although the production structure has to some extent shifted away from agriculture towards tertiary activities (i.e. administrative, service, professional, sales, and related occupations), these structural transformations have not resulted in a corresponding shift in employment opportunities. Three-quarters of Nepalis still work in agriculture, but only produce 35 per cent of GDP, whereas the tertiary sector supplies around 20 per cent of the jobs, but accounts for more than half of economic output (MoF 2014). From a socio-economic standpoint, this asymmetry in production and employment is highly problematic (Acharya 2000; see also Khare and Slany 2011). Most government offices, international organisations, banks, and private companies are based in the capital city, which means that new jobs were generated primarily within the urban labour market. While the spatial concentration of professional employment in Kathmandu has given rise to a new propertied urban class (cf. Liechty 2003: 46–52), it also implies that little progress has been made in alleviating rural poverty.

Apart from these spatial disparities, social differences based on gender and caste/ ethnicity also significantly shape people's chances of securing a white-collar job in Nepal. A study conducted in 2000 has revealed that two-thirds of the high-level posts in all national political parties, the civil service, jurisdiction, and education sector were occupied by upper castes, i.e. Brahmin and Chhetri, who only represent about a third of the total population (as cited in Lawoti 2005: 104–105 Table 3.6). Furthermore, Newars, the ethnic/ linguistic group which has long been settled in the Kathmandu Valley, retained a traditional stronghold in the private business sector, and also benefitted from being in close proximity to the country's political leaders. By contrast, Madhesis, who constitute one third of Nepal's population, only held 11 per cent of the high-level jobs, and Janajatis, who together make up 22 per cent of the population, had seven per cent of the jobs. Dalits,

being nine per cent of the population, were hardly represented at all in those leading professions (ibid.). In addition, a labour market survey carried out in 2008 has shown that 70 per cent of those Nepalis engaged in non-manual work are men, while agricultural production has increasingly been 'womanised' (Khare and Slany 2011: 17–18 Table 4.5).

The privileged position of upper caste men, including some Newars, is to some extent historically rooted. When the Ranas came to power in 1854, they manifested certain privileges and rules defined by Hinduism in a national legal code, the Muluki Ain. This code was an attempt to classify and rank all people in Nepal, with the result that the distinction between 'caste' and 'tribes', upheld, for example, in neighbouring India, was dismantled (Middleton and Shneiderman 2008). Instead, Nepal's ethnic groups were ranked between upper castes and lower castes/ occupational groups, with the latter being collectively referred to as Dalits (Höfer 1979). This social order also remained largely intact after the Rana dynasty was brought to an end in 1951. During the Panchayat era, the dominance of the Hindu monarchy remained unquestioned and discussions about caste/ ethnic inequalities were prohibited. Consequently, it remained uncertain to what extent development efforts effectively reached the poor and the marginalised. Often Kathmandu's upper social groups managed to use their connections and educational advances to reap the benefits of economic progress, and hence to reproduce their social privileges (Gellner 2007).

Since the end of the civil war in 2006, however, there are some indications that gender-specific or caste-based life trajectories are becoming more divergent. On the one hand, the inflation rate increased significantly, due to rising food and oil prices, and has been in double figures for several years in a row (MoF 2014). The increase in costs of living has been particularly noticeable in urban areas, where it constantly risks diminishing families' financial assets. For many working-class and even for some middle-class families, it has become difficult to cover their daily needs based on one income only. Consequently, it is no longer uncommon for women to involve in paid labour, rather than being exclusively engaged in household work (Khare and Slany 2011; Liechty 1996). On the other hand, debates about persisting social inequalities and discriminating practices linked to people's caste/ ethnic background have increasingly been put on the political agenda. In particular, the Janajati movement and the Maoist movement have contributed to the politicisation of these issues since the mid-1990s (Gellner 2007; Onta 2006). In 2004, the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), which serves as an umbrella organisation for Nepal's ethnic and indigenous people, announced a new five-tiered classification scheme to categorise 59 of Nepal's officially recognised ethnic groups

as 'endangered', 'highly marginalised', 'marginalised', 'disadvantaged', and 'advantaged'.[18] Whilst this categorisation attempts to account for a range of criteria, including geographical, cultural, and economic indicators, the inverted hierarchy excludes Brahmin, Chhetri, upper-caste Madhesis, as well as Dalits. Nonetheless, the system was well received, especially by the international donor community which subsequently has allocated substantial funds in support of 'highly marginalised' and 'endangered' groups (Middleton and Shneiderman 2008; Shneiderman 2013). In addition, this categorisation is likely to be used as a basis for a framework for affirmative action introduced by the government in relation to its own recruitment process (Sedhai 2013).

It is commonly believed that such efforts to narrow the social gap and to increase people's standards of living will only be of success if employers can draw from a better qualified workforce. The Nepali economist, Meena Acharya (2000: 184), asserts that "Nepal faces a dual problem of unemployment and unavailability of skilled and semi-skilled human power in the modern sectors". The parental generation, for the most part, is seen to lack the educational qualifications that are necessary to seize the occupational opportunities emerging in the modern labour market. Among older age groups, women, in particular, are twice as likely as men to be illiterate (CBS 2008: 49 Table 5.2). Already in the 1990s, many middle-class families in Kathmandu therefore made it a priority to invest in their children's education. As Liechty (2003: 215) has argued, many of these parents came to think of formal education as possibly the only way they could imagine to ensure that the next generation would succeed in securing a professional employment and in retaining the family's privileged social status. In more recent years, it has become a priority for families from across the various social strata to provide for the education of the younger generation, in the hope that the offspring will be in a better position to take advantage of the changing labour market and specifically of the new career opportunities in the tertiary sector (see also Valentin 2005, 2011).

The significance of spatial (im)mobility

In the case of Nepali society, the relationship between spatial mobility and immobility is perhaps best explained with reference to the two local concepts of 'home' [*ghar*] and 'beyond' [*para*]. Many people in Nepal identify with their 'home' not only because it is the land of the ancestors and often though not always their place of birth, but also because it is a place of emotional and spiritual attachment. Drawing from field research conducted in Namsaling, a rural part of Ilam district located at the eastern border of Nepal, the

[18] For details of the categorisation, I refer to the web page of NEFIN. Available online: http://www.nefin.org.np/list/Classification/5/0/6 [Last accessed October 13, 2013]

geographer Bhim P. Subedi (1999: 138) writes about people's relationship with the native home:

> *Ghara*[19] is not just the house to live in and not something that can be anywhere and can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance. It is neither limited to physical structure nor a physical space to carry on livelihood. It captures broader networks, intimate relations with the land and environment, and a place of rooted memory. [emphasis in the original]

By contrast, *para* refers to any place beyond the regular boundaries of home. While *para* is not a preferred place to live for long, it is still deemed to be of great importance for people's life chances. By moving beyond the confines of the home community, a person is thought to acquire more knowledge and to stand better chances of finding a job to earn a living. While *ghar* is the place to live (and to which to return), *para* is the place to experience (Subedi 1999: 139). The insights that the individual obtains while away from home are seen to allow the wider community to keep pace with changing circumstances. On the other hand, a profound sense of rootedness within the home community, which is usually demonstrated through regular visits, helps the individual to maintain a strong security network. Thus, the two concepts need to be understood as complementary and of significance for both those who move and those who stay at home (Subedi 1999: 141).

Evidence suggests that Nepali people have been highly mobile between 'home' and 'beyond' for several centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, people in Nepal have moved from the hill region to the southern plains in search of better livelihood opportunities (Regmi 1978). Around the same time, Nepali men started to migrate also beyond the country's borders to Lahore (in today's Pakistan) to join the armed forces of the Sikh ruler, Ranjit Singh. This tradition is reflected in the name 'lahures', which is still used today to refer to international labour migrants from Nepal (e.g. Graner and Gurung 2003; Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurunga 2001). Since 1816, Nepali men have been systematically recruited into the (British) Indian army (e.g. Shrestha 1990). Others migrated to neighbouring India to work on the tea plantations in Darjeeling and Assam (Chettri 2013; Hoffman 2001). Estimates suggest that by the end of the nineteenth century, half of the population in Darjeeling was of Nepali origin (Caplan 1970; Shrestha 1990).

India has continued to be the primary destination of migrants from Nepal to date. This is partly because of the open border between the two countries, which was officially recognised in the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship between India and Nepal and allows citizens of the two nations to enter the neighbouring country without a passport or other immigration documents (Panday 1999). On the other hand, foreign migration from

[19] Subedi (1999) uses the more colloquial pronunciation of the term '*ghar*', with an additional 'a'. Regardless which spelling is preferred, the meaning of *ghar* and *ghara* is the same.

Nepal to destinations other than India had long been restricted by national policies. In the course of state decentralisation in the 1990s and 2000s, however, it became easier for Nepali people to obtain travel documents (Graner 2010). In addition, the Nepali government has actively promoted foreign labour migration to countries in Southeast Asia and the Gulf region since the end of the twentieth century.

Legal restrictions, nonetheless, continue to apply to female migration. In 1998, the government introduced a new law which prohibited women under the age of 30 from travelling to the Gulf region. The regulation was imposed in response to repeated cases of gender-based violence against female migrants working in Arab countries (Thieme and Wyss 2005: 63–64). The ban was partly lifted in 2003, but was reinforced in 2012, after it was made public that several Nepali women working as domestic servants in Gulf countries once again had become victims of sexual and psychological exploitation. These official regulations notwithstanding, the number of female labour migrants has been consistently on the rise. Many of these women rely on unlicensed recruitment agents, who channel them abroad via the open border with India. Such informal migration routes, however, exposes female migrants to even greater risks (e.g. Adhikari 2012; Gurung 2003). Even so, the large majority of foreign migrants from Nepal are still likely to be male. Official statistics available for the years 2006 to 2012, for example, show that over 90 per cent of the 1.7 million people who left Nepal during this period to work in countries other than India were men (Adhikari 2012: 20 Table 3.1).

In view of these population movements, it becomes apparent that Nepalis have long been moving to other places both within and beyond the nation's borders in search of better livelihood opportunities. Considering that only 15 per cent of Nepal's total area of 147,181 square kilometres is arable (CBS 2013), the basic need to grow food has been an important driving force behind population movements from the hills and mountains in the north of Nepal to the fertile lands in the southern plains. A new wave of internal migration was triggered by the emergence of manufacturing industries in the Kathmandu Valley in the late 1980s and the 1990s. The workers employed in these labour-intensive industries, for the most part, were women and adolescents from the rural areas in the Central and Eastern Region of Nepal (Graner 2001: 256–257). Many of them had not completed basic levels of formal education (ibid.). Even though the conditions for unskilled and semi-skilled labourers have significantly deteriorated in the urban labour market since the mid-1990s, people have continued to migrate to the capital city from other parts of Nepal. As a result, the Kathmandu Valley has emerged to be one of the fastest growing urban agglomerations in South Asia (Muzzini and Aparicio 2013).

With the downturn in export-oriented industries in the early 1990s, foreign currency earnings initially declined rapidly. In response, the Nepali government in

cooperation with foreign employment agencies (colloquially known as 'manpower agencies') significantly stepped up efforts to promote labour migration beyond national borders to emerging economies in Southeast Asia and the Gulf region. In the past two decades, foreign remittances have increased significantly. According to official records, remittance income amounted to almost Rs. 300 million, i.e. 22 per cent of GDP, in 2011 (Adhikari 2012: 24 Table 3.2). This figure is the highest in South Asia and the fifth highest in the world (see also Khare and Slany 2011). Nevertheless, some scholars have argued that these official statistics still grossly underestimate the total volume of remittances received by Nepali households, suggesting that it is more likely to be between Rs. 20 and 60 billion (for a discussion of these figures see Graner 2010: 28). There is more agreement regarding the profile of foreign workers from Nepal: The large majority of them are men aged 20 to 30 years, who often have dropped out of secondary school (e.g. Adhikari 2012; Bruslé 2010; Graner 2010). The money these young men send home is primarily spend to cover more immediate domestic expenditures and, only to a lesser extent, it is used for long-term investments. Even so, foreign remittances have saved many families, in rural areas of Nepal in particular, from falling below the poverty line. As Elvira Graner (2001, 2010) has argued, these developments have major implications for the village economy. Whereas recruitment into the carpet factories in Kathmandu was essentially done via family and village networks, access to the international labour market is almost exclusively controlled by foreign employment agencies. These middlemen charge about Rs. 60,000 to Rs. 90,000 – an amount for which most Nepali labourers need to work at least for two to three years (Graner 2010: 37). Consequently, informal credit systems have seen a tremendous revival in rural communities. In addition, it is questionable whether rural households in Nepal can still be classified as 'agricultural', considering that foreign remittances constitute a major source of income for many of these families. In view of these most recent economic developments, experts have emphasised that Nepal has started to shift from being a predominately agrarian economy to one increasingly dependent on remittances (Seddon, Adhikari, and Gurung 2002; Sharma 2012).

Furthermore, there exist a number of non-economic factors, contributing to high levels of spatial mobility within Nepali society. On the one hand, both internal and international migration accelerated significantly due to political instabilities. It is assumed that up to 600,000 people were displaced over the ten-year period of the civil war between government forces and the Maoists (e.g. Aditya, Upreti, and Adhikary 2006: 101; A. Ghimire 2010: 91). More recently, an additional 6,000 to 8,000 people were forced to leave their homes in the Terai, as political protests demanding the formation of a Madhes autonomous region escalated in 2007 into a violent conflict between the different communities residing in the southern parts of Nepal (Arnøy 2012; Poudel and Ghimire

2010). More than half of the Nepali people displaced in these two conflicts are thought to have left the country. The overwhelming majority of those who stayed in Nepal fled to the capital city and other urban centres, which, in addition to safety, were seen to offer a whole range of better living conditions, including educational facilities, health services, and income opportunities. Even though the life of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) continues to be fraught with difficulties, the majority and especially the younger ones among them have often been able to benefit in some way from the opportunities available in the urban centres (e.g. Carney and Madsen 2009; A. Ghimire 2010; Nelson 2013). Consequently, most IDPs – whether rich or poor – would prefer to stay permanently, despite the fact that the government continues to promote a definite return to the place of origin as the only (and least expensive) solution for the predicament of the IDPs in Nepal (A. Ghimire 2010).

People's decisions to leave their natal homes, furthermore, need to be understood within the context of social norms. A very common reason behind rural-to-rural migration in Nepal is marriage. In Nepali Hindu tradition, it is common for the bride to join the groom's family after their marriage and to continue to stay with her in-laws even if the husband passes away (Subedi 1999: 128). In this sense, female migration is not a new social phenomenon in Nepal, but has for long been an integral part of the lives of most Nepali women. In a similar manner, some research suggests that migration also constitutes a kind of rite of passage to adulthood in the male life-cycle. Studies conducted in villages in the western hills of Nepal describe the tradition of 'escape' [*bhāgne*] by which teenage boys leave their home communities without consulting their parents and go to the city or to India (Sharma 2009: 312–313; Thieme and Wyss 2005: 73). Often they only return back home after having earned some money. In this way, young men can demonstrate that they are adult enough to provide for their families and hence can gain full acceptance into the adult community. These practices suggest that migration has long been institutionalised in the culture of various communities in Nepal.

During the second half of the twentieth century, however, there have been some changes in the ways in which Nepalis think about migration, its purposes, and potential destinations. At that time, the primacy of Kathmandu as the economic and political centre of the country was further reinforced through development discourses and pedagogic strategies. In the textbooks used in schools across the country, the city was depicted as a place of 'progress', 'development', 'modernisation' (Pigg 1992: 495), and an urban childhood as 'diligent study' and 'carefree play' (ibid.: 501). The village, on the other hand, has been associated with underdevelopment and backwardness, and a rural childhood with poor living conditions and hard work (Pigg 1992; see also Gellner 2004; Lind Petersen 2011). At university level, the government through TU implemented the National

Development Service (NDS), a civic service programme which made it mandatory for students studying at master's level in Kathmandu during the 1970s to spend one year working in rural areas of the country, usually as teachers in public schools which had been newly established in various villages (Messerschmidt, Yadama, and Silwal 2007; Shakya 2008). The aim of these educational policies was to bridge the divide between the rural and the urban areas and to integrate developmental discourses into the formal training of the younger generation. However, the approach taken essentially implied a strong dichotomy, with the developed city, on the one hand, and the underdeveloped rest of the country, on the other. Even at present, many Nepalis still seem to believe that 'development' and 'progress' is not something generated locally, at the village level, but something concentrated in and emanating from the capital city.

In the 1990s and 2000s, modern technologies, such as the radio, television, mobile phones, and, more recently, the internet, became an integral part of daily life in Kathmandu and opened up need ways for Nepali people to connect on an international scale. The information circulated by the global media have fuelled desires to take advantage of better educational and occupational opportunities abroad and to escape the difficulties of daily life in Nepal (Adhikari 2010; Liechty 2010: xi). Fantasies of earning enough money and gaining social prestige, however, are constantly belied by stories of migrants and returnees about the difficult and sometimes horrific living conditions abroad (Kunreuther 2006). Such ambiguities notwithstanding, the 'outside world' often seems to be in closer reach for many young people in Kathmandu than any village in Nepal. Stacy Pigg (1992: 493) even suggests that "the most elite, educated, and urbanised, are so socially distant from village life in Nepal that for them to go to a village is tantamount to visiting an alien land". In this sense, public debates about global migration trends have further reinforced Kathmandu's locality as the country's 'gateway and gatekeeper' to the outside world (see also Liechty 2003: 40).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of young Nepalis who go abroad on a student visa has increased rapidly. Previously, only very few Nepalis whose families belonged to the established elite in Kathmandu went abroad to attend educational institutions outside Nepal. Liechty (2003: 215) emphasises this point in his ethnographic study, noting that "while the elite construct their dreams around imagined lives in distant global culture/ power centers, for the middle class, perceptions of the future are still very much centered on Kathmandu". Over the past two decades, however, Kathmandu's new middle class increasingly made it a priority also for their children to attain an international education. In part, parents, who could afford it, sought to send their children abroad, because of more immediate security concerns as well as far-reaching uncertainties about the country's economic and political future (see also Valentin 2012b). At the same

time, new and somewhat more affordable opportunities of attaining a foreign degree have become available for students from countries in parts of the global South, including Nepal, as a result of processes of internationalisation in the higher education sector. In particular, European countries, Australia, Hong Kong, and Singapore have launched a number of educational initiatives and new immigration regulations with the aim to become more established on the global education market (e.g. Baas 2007; Valentin 2012a; Waters and Brooks 2011). It is difficult to obtain reliable data on the total number of international student migrants from Nepal.[20] But figures available about Nepali students in major 'receiving' countries provide an idea of the great magnitude of education-related out-migration from Nepal. In the US, for example, Nepali students were the eleventh largest group of international students during the academic year 2010/ 2011 and, in Japan and Australia, they were even the eighth largest.[21] These figures indicate that global migration trends related to internationalisation of higher education play a significant role also for a relatively small and poor country, like Nepal, despite the fact that such a country is commonly thought to be at the periphery of the global knowledge system (cf. Altbach 1989).

Estimates suggest that between 500 and 1,500 Nepalis per day have left from the international airport in Kathmandu in recent years (Adhikari 2012; Deshar 2011). Many of these Nepalis are young people who go abroad in order to work in countries in the Gulf region or Southeast Asia (e.g. Bruslé 2010; Graner and Gurung 2003) or to study at universities mainly in North America, Europe or Australia (e.g. Sijapati and Hermann 2012; Valentin 2012a). This trend towards out-migration – described by some scholars as 'the Nepali exodus' (Sharma 2010) – has generated considerable debate within Nepali society. On the one hand, international migration promises to be a way for young Nepalis to build a better future life for themselves and their families. Apart from contributing financial remittances, it is hoped that young migrants will also contribute to the country's development upon return by drawing from the knowledge and skills they have acquired abroad (Ghimire and Maharjan 2014). Critics, on the other hand, have warned against the heavy costs of this 'brain drain' and against the great loss of youthful potential, as Nepal's youth is seen to be primarily contributing to the wealth of other countries (Khare and Slany 2011). In recent years, youth migration has consequently emerged to be one of the key concerns of Nepali society – not least because, increasingly, young Nepalis seem to

[20] According to the figures published by the Ministry of Education for the year 2011, 62,391 Non-Objection Letters were issued which permit Nepali students to go abroad for higher education (as cited in Ghimire 2011: 53). Besides obvious data inconsistencies in the report, this figure underestimates the number of international student migrants as not all students require an approval letter for their visa applications or sponsorships.

[21] These figures were retrieved from the Institute of International Education, which publishes the Atlas of Student Mobility. Available online: http://www.iie.org/Research-and-Publications/Project-Atlas [Last accessed: August 20, 2012]

break with prevailing values in rural areas, as they leave behind their home [*ghar*] and permanently settle in places outside Nepal.

The meaning of success

Studies of social life in Nepal suggest that whether or not a person is perceived to have a successful life largely depends on the expectations and perceptions of other members of society. In this respect, the human geographer and Nepal expert Kathrin Rankin (2004: 119) asserts that "while markets in money and land are key sources for the generation of wealth, it is through [...] social investments that one can uphold the good reputation and honour necessary for economic security, indeed survival, within Newar society" and, I would add, Nepali society, more generally (cf. Cameron 1998; Liechty 2003). Consequently, private gain may be of little value if they are not directed towards the wider social good.

One of the key concepts with which people from many sections of Nepali society invest their actions with meaning is '*ijjat*'. As the quotation from Rankin indicates, the Nepali word '*ijjat*' can be translated into 'honour' or 'reputation'. Other possible translations also include 'dignity', 'respectability', and 'prestige' (Cameron 1998: 135; Liechty 2003: 83). While ascribed facts of birth, such as caste and gender, help define what will be judged as honourable behaviour, *ijjat* is largely an achieved state (Cameron 1998). That is, it needs to be actively earned and continuously reproduced over time. These studies suggest that the social respectability of women is held particularly high, because any kind of behaviour considered to be inappropriate for a woman may jeopardise the arrangement of a favourable marriage, which, in turn, would undermine the social prestige of the entire family (Cameron 1998; Liechty 1996). But also men may risk losing their honour if their public appearance does not conform to social norms. Being drunk, using drugs, behaving in a noisy and uncivilised manner, involving in a sexual relationship outside marriage is generally understood to be socially unacceptable and may, in the worst case, lead to being prohibited from entering the house of the family or the home village (Subedi 1999: 128; see also Lind Petersen 2011: 121). But compared to members from less privileged social groups, those belonging to upper-status groups – especially, men, elders, upper castes, the urban elite, or more affluent social classes – certainly have the advantage that their behaviour is more readily evaluated as prestigious. Nonetheless, as Mary M. Cameron (1998: 137) has made explicit, "one can be a dishonorable Bāhun [Brahmin] or an honorable Bādi [Dalit], not through birth, occupation, or descent but through one's actions".

There are several ways in which people can nurture and reproduce their social status. Among the ones cited by several scholars are solidarity with one's kin, sharing and generosity, ritual observance, deference to people of higher status, including elders (e.g. Cameron 1998; Rankin 2004). In his study of middle-class culture in Kathmandu, Liechty (2003: 83) further emphasises the importance of more 'modern' possessions, such as imported commodities and educational credentials, which have gained significance for notions of social respectability during the second half of the twentieth century (see also Hachhethu 2007). In general, however, *ijjat* is achieved through the efforts of each individual member of the family and redounded to the entire household. An individual that brings great honour to the family through exceptional effort is likely to be remembered for generations (Cameron 1998). At the same time, the practices and performances through which one can gain a good reputation and can maintain an honourable status necessitate (often substantial) financial investments. In this context, it is important to note that prestige is not to be gained through a one-off performance, but has to be consistently nurtured and reproduced. Staking claims in the social economy of *ijjat* therefore demands a steady and sufficient flow of monetary means. Economic success is consequently often a precondition for the possession of *ijjat* (see also Liechty 2003: 84).

Like any other form of capital, *ijjat* is only of value as long as it is recognised and appreciated by other members of society (cf. Bourdieu 1986). As Sarah Miller (1992: 396) has explained, "identity seems to be delivered back to you from others. 'What are they saying about us?' [...] could be an icon for an identity based on *ijjat* and prestige" (as cited in Rankin 2004: 119). Accordingly, people's chances for gaining recognition as a successful person are closely bound up with their efforts to invest in and to nurture social relationships. For many aspirational young people in Kathmandu, building a successful future life is therefore primarily a matter of meeting others' expectations and realising the future pathways which Nepali society commonly perceives as desirable and auspicious.

Conclusion

Large-scale structural changes have given rise to new educational opportunities and occupational fields, which in turn seem to offer better chances for increased levels of social and spatial mobility. In particular, educated young Nepalis are commonly thought to be well prepared to take full advantage of these newly emerging opportunities. The social, economic, and political trends of the past three decades give reason to hope that the educated younger generation will be able to attain higher levels of education, participate in the modern labour market, and capitalise on the possibilities associated with

international migration. In this respect, young people's lives seem to take place under markedly different circumstances than those of their parents and grandparents.

A unilateral focus on these generational differences, however, runs the risk of overlooking certain values and norms which continue to be passed on from one generation to the next. Existing research suggests that in Nepal's *ijjat* economy, it is still highly important for a young person to comply with established notions of social respectability. The norms and values upheld by the parental generation, therefore, continue to serve as crucial points of reference against which young people's performance is being judged. The challenge, however, is that it is no longer sufficient for Nepal's younger population to primarily reproduce the life paths and achievements of previous generations. As the newly educated youth, they are expected to pursue higher goals and identify new ways of being, in order to realise the hope of a socially successful and financially secure future life.

Rather than solely reviewing the historical and cultural factors which serve as the backdrop for young people's experiences and perceptions, I have begun to locate the concept of youth within the discourses and agendas of a range of different social actors. In the political agendas, school materials, and development programmes, the category of youth has been commonly depicted in a rather dualistic manner. On the one hand, youth is seen to be a source of hope for a better future, as the younger generation seems to be uniquely poised to take advantage of a whole range of new opportunities. On the other hand, youth is directly associated with heightened levels of uncertainty and anxiety, as young Nepalis no longer follow familiar life trajectories, and thus seem to increasingly depart from established practices and beliefs. The empirical chapters that follow continue the theme of young people's life chances and the future visions ascribed to the practices of educated youth by focusing on the future aspirations and the educational and occupational experiences of a group of young Nepalis who, in 2011/ 2012, were all studying, working, and living in Kathmandu.

CHAPTER FOUR

Fashioning the future

Social influences and the formation of young people's aspirations

> Saroj: [N] 'Study abroad' is a kind of fashion. In the same way, there is also pressure to migrate to Kathmandu from outside [the valley] or to study [natural] sciences. Because of these influences and pressures, we turn away from our goals. So there is that fashion. People like to copy what others do. 'If they are going, why shouldn't our son and daughter go as well?'

Saroj and I first met in early October 2011 on one of my first days on campus. He immediately offered to show me around the science complex, and later invited me to come along to one of the lab sessions, which were part of his studies for a master's degree in physics. I got to know Saroj as a courteous and dutiful young Chhetri man, and a particularly diligent student. As far as I could record it, he never missed a single class. During the following weeks and months, we saw each other regularly on and around campus. On one of those occasions, we were standing amidst a group of friends by the tea stalls. The discussion had turned to the expected benefits of going abroad for further studies – a topic so often talked about that the conversation initially appeared to take the usual, monotonous course. Saroj's remark, however, took me by surprise, not only because it was followed by a rather awkward silence. But also because Saroj suddenly appeared to be rather tense, which was unlike him. Usually, he came across as a very self-contained person. But now he seemed to suggest that young people's ideas about their own future lives sometimes faded into the background as others sought to exert considerable influence on the decisions young people made about their educational and occupational careers.

In this chapter I investigate critical situations in which young people were compelled to make a decision in relation to their education which in turn was likely to be of significance for their life chances in the long term. This analytical focus on vital conjunctures of youth allows me to identify the future trajectories to which educated,

young Nepalis commonly aspire. I am specifically interested in the ways in which dominant aspirations arise out of a multitude of social interactions. Following my theoretical conception, I hold that young people's ideas, wants, and desires regarding the future are socially embedded, meaning they are always formed in the 'thick of social life' (see Chapter 1). Yet, rather than simply assuming that 'aspirations about the good life [...] exist in all societies' (Appadurai 2004: 67), I want to explore exactly which achievements and experiences young people in Nepal generally associates with a successful future life. Through an investigation into young people's reflections on their priorities in life and the hopes they have for the future, I seek to understand what motivates these young people and which points of reference – be it certain norms and values, public debates, or other social actors – guide their decisions about the future.

The quest for educational credentials

All 40 research participants were either in the first or second year of their graduate studies and were hoping to complete their master's degrees in the near future. However, when we talked about the completion of their studies, most research participants expressed the intention to attain additional academic credentials even after completing their graduate studies. Some said that they were interested in studying for a master's degree in a different discipline. Others aspired to continue their studies at doctoral level. In this context, several research participants referred me to an apparently popular saying: 'Your education ends when your life ends'.

Formal education had been an important part of my respondents' daily routines throughout their young lives. As graduate students, they all had spent at least 16 years of their lives within the formal education system. The hopes and ideas that young people articulated when talking about their potential futures suggest that formal education remained a priority for these young people also in their long-term planning. I suggest that young people's educational experiences and related future orientations were to a large extent the product of a multitude of social influences that press down on young people as they move through the formal education system. In this context, I found it useful to think through specific decision-making situations that young Nepalis had to negotiate over the course of their educational careers as sites of vital conjunctures: "socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation in a life" (Johnson-Hanks 2005: 871). By discussing how research participants experienced and remembered certain vital conjunctures of their educational careers, I identify the values that these young people attached to their educational attainments and explore where they hoped their quest for educational credentials would lead them.

Formal education and social obligations

Saroj was one of the 22 research participants who had migrated to the Kathmandu Valley after completing secondary school. He was born in 1987 and had grown up in a small town located in Kailali district in far-western Nepal. While his parents and his two younger sisters were still living in his home town, Saroj had been staying in Kathmandu for the past five years. He had moved to the capital city at the age of 20 in order to earn a university degree in physics. In 2010, he successfully completed his studies for the degree of Bachelor of Science in Physics and enrolled for graduate studies the same year. Saroj's enthusiasm for studying physics was impressive. In the small, sparely furnished room, which he rented together with a cousin, he had accumulated a large pile of books on his specific field of interest: astrophysics. When I visited him at his place one afternoon in early November 2011, I asked Saroj why he had decided to study physics at university. He replied: [N]

> "It has been my dream to study [natural] science since my childhood. Let's say, when I studied at grade nine or ten, that's when I first thought about to become a scientist – just like Einstein. At that time I was thinking: 'May I become like Einstein and may I make Nepal, my place, glorious!' Nepal is a very small country in comparison with other countries in the world. 'How can I make Nepal more known in the world? How will I be able to do something from here?' With these questions on my mind, I chose to study physics."

Saroj was not the only research participant, who attached high-flying aspirations to his educational choices. In fact, his answer reminded me of the interviews I had already conducted in the previous weeks with some of his peers. One of the first students I had interviewed was Rajit, a 23-years-old Chhetri man. Rajit and Saroj both studied for the MSc degree in physics. But otherwise the two young men had comparatively little in common. Rajit had grown up and was still living with his family in one of the residential areas which have grown enormously since the late 1980s and have increasingly replaced the paddy fields on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Although the two young men came from rather different backgrounds, Rajit answers to my question concerning his decision to study at university was very similar to the one Saroj gave me: [E]

> "'I can do something for me. I can do something for my family, for my society and actually for my country also. I can do something!' [continues in Nepali] I increasingly gained confidence in my capacity to do something of value to others, so that they may follow my example. If I would not have continued my education, I would not have developed this kind of awareness. [later in the conversation] I came first in the SLC. [...] And therefore everybody said I should go for [natural] sciences. In our context, when people know that you study [natural] sciences, they think very highly of you. Also because of that I chose to study physics."

Both these men had become more aware of their capacity to contribute to the wider social good as a result of the progress they had made in terms of education. Formal education, according to these young men, was of great value because the knowledge they gained enabled them to take responsibility for others – be it the family, the wider community, or even the whole country. When talking about social obligations, several other respondents also explained that they were now better able to distinguish right from wrong because of the education they have obtained in school and at university. According to these respondents, morally correct behaviour was a matter of accepting and being able to fulfil one's social responsibilities. Consequently, having the capacity to 'do something' constituted an important source of self-worth and social respect for young Nepalis, and young men in particular. This specific vision of 'doing something' to become a kind of role model for others was certainly rather vague. But it still influenced aspirational young men, like Saroj and Rajit, in their choice of subject. Physics was generally perceived to be a comparatively difficult subject and hence it was commonly thought that students of the natural science were particularly capable and knowledgeable.

Young women likewise emphasised that their educational success helped them to build up a sense of self-worth. But there were differences between young women and young men with regard to the practices and aspirations through which they expressed and hoped to develop a greater sense of self-esteem. To illustrate this claim I want to recall an informal conversation that I had with Shreya, a 25-year-old Chhetri woman, in early March 2012. We were walking together to Shreya's workplace through New Baneshwor, a middle-class neighbourhood to the east of the old city centre. Holi, the festival of colours, was coming up and so I was constantly in a state of alert, as I did not want to get hit by one of the water bombs that teenage boys were throwing from the roof terraces of the residential houses even on the days before the actual festival. But Shreya assured me that we were safe.

> Shreya: [E] We are not like schoolgirls or even bachelor students. They get teased by the boys and all they can do is to look down. But we know how to defend us, so the guys just leave us alone. That's why education is so important for us women.
>
> Andrea: [E] So, they only target young girls and not adults with their water bombs?
>
> Shreya: [E] We are also young! [laughs] But education has made us more confident. Just, speaking like this. See, even after I passed SLC, I was not able to speak like this. But, now I can easily chat along and talk to other people. This is because of education.

According to Shreya, obtaining a formal education helped young women to feel more confident about participating in public life. Apparently it was possible to distinguish an 'uneducated', timid young woman from an 'educated', confident young woman based on

small gestures, such as looking up when walking past a group of men, feeling at ease when talking to other people, or sharing her own opinion with others openly. At first glance, a young woman showing this kind of behaviour may appear to object to established notions of respectable femininity. Traditionally, young women were expected to show proper deference, especially within the public sphere (see also Ahearn 2001a; Bennett 1983). Looking more closely, however, the young women I spoke with had no intention to resist established gender roles. On the contrary, several of the female research participants directly linked the status of an 'educated woman' to the hope for a favourable marriage, which traditionally is perceived to be a guarantor of respectable femininity.

> Sumita: N "In the past, only men used to ride motorbikes. But now, you see so many women who know how to drive a motorbike. There is nothing that girls cannot do. They are free to do the same things as boys. In the past, families gave priority to the sons' education. But now, girls and boys are treated equally. That is because, in the past, boys used to marry illiterate girls, even though boys were more educated. But now, boys want girls of the same educational level. They demand girls according to their level. Like, in my case, if I would have married when I was in my teens, I would probably have got married to just any kind of guy. […] Now I am studying at master's level. I won't marry a boy studying at +2 [level], will I?! Nobody does!"

> Chapala: N "In the past, daughters were told not to study. Only sons were allowed to study. But that kind of concept is not there anymore. In our village [in Udayapur district], people think that everybody needs to study. And daughters are supposed to study even more, as we are the ones who go to others' homes after marriage. We won't get into trouble, when we go after having studied. Women should also be able to stand on their own feet. [...] That kind of thinking is there nowadays."

Sumita and Chapala are two of the 14 female respondents who were still unmarried at the time of my field research. In our conversations, these young women frequently explained that being educated meant being 'independent' or 'free'. Although they often used exactly these words, they did not seek independence from their domestic duties or from any other obligations they had toward their families. None of these young women seriously challenged their role as a future wife and daughter-in-law. However, they hoped that their status as an 'educated woman' would allow them to find a husband of a higher status and to gain the respect not only of their natal family but also of the husband's family. For these young women, obtaining an academic education therefore held the promise of gaining social respect and maintaining a great degree of self-determination also after getting married and moving in with the husband's family.

The narratives of both male and female respondents need to be seen within the context of the socio-historical circumstances that shaped young people's experiences of formal schooling. Most of the research participants were studying at primary and secondary school level in the late 1980s and the 1990s. Researchers working with school-aged children in Nepal at that time have shown that the textbooks used in public schools

were laid out in a way that integrated debates about national development programmes and foreign aid policies into the stories and practices of young people's everyday lives (Ahearn 2001a; Pigg 1992; Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). These dominant discourses promoted a specific model of the educated person as someone who 'serves the people' and 'works toward the development of the country' (Skinner and Holland 1996: 290). In later years, the idea of equal opportunities for all people of Nepal regardless of their gender or caste/ ethnicity was also increasingly promoted through development programmes and educational policies (Valentin 2005). The status of an 'educated' person therefore was perceived to be a very honourable status, not least because an educated person was thought to more capable of fulfilling social expectations and of contributing to the wider social good. Thus, young men and young women alike perceived of their educational attainments as a source of self-worth. In this context, I contend that these young people develop a sense of agency not primarily as a result of actions they had to take in response to adverse circumstances. Rather, I found that most of the young Nepalis I spoke with grew in confidence and self-esteem as a result of the positive feedback they received from other members of society who valued their educational achievements.

Parents' financial commitments and hopes

Whilst it was certainly important for the research participants to be able to identify as an educated person and to fulfil the social obligations associated with such a higher status, there were other, perhaps even more forceful, influences that encouraged these young Nepalis to do well in school and at university. This became apparent in another conversation I had with Saroj, in early February 2011. After having spent several hours in a cold classroom attending a lecture on electronics, we decided to sit for some time on the sports field of the campus in order to warm up in the sunshine. Since the lectures had finished, most students had already left and the campus grounds were almost vacant. I took the opportunity to tell Saroj that I had been quite surprised by his reaction to the discussion we had with a group of friends some weeks ago (see quote at the beginning of this chapter). After all, he had told me before that he himself had long aspired to study physics and that it had been his decision to move to Kathmandu for this purpose. In response, Saroj explained: [N]

> "Actually, I am a three times failed student. I failed in grade eight in two subjects: mathematics and physics. These are rather difficult subjects and I failed in both of them. When I reached grade nine, I again failed in both subjects: again mathematics and sciences. At this stage, I was thinking about dropping out of school. But my father encouraged me, saying: 'You can be just like Einstein. Einstein also failed in school. But he did very well later on.' Then, I started to think that I could also become somebody if I just keep on studying. I could also do something in the field of

> sciences. But then I failed again at the intermediate level [now known as +2 level]. At that time, I was absolutely [emphasis] certain that I would totally [emphasis] leave sciences. But again my father advised me to continue. Again he gave the example of Einstein, and again I got encouraged. Till now, I have not failed again and so I happen to continue to master's level."

Like Saroj, the overwhelming majority of research participant had not smoothly progressed through the different levels of the education system. In fact, only one out of the 40 young Nepalis I spoke with was 21 years old at the time when he studied for a graduate degree. Based on the structural set-up of Nepal's formal education system, 21 years would be the 'normal age' of somebody who enrols in grade one at the age of five and then continues to master's level without any grade repetitions or interruptions (UNESCO 2006; see also Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3). However, as Karen Valentin (2011: 100) argues, while such ideas of linear progress and predictability have become inbuilt in national education systems as a result of global approaches to planned development, they hardly ever correspond to the realities of young people's lives in Nepal. According to my research participants, many young people in Nepal struggled to follow the ideal of an uninterrupted educational career. Like the majority of young people attending public schools in Nepal, some of the respondents failed to pass the SLC at the first attempt. Others had to delay exams involuntarily, because of lingering political agitations which resulted in the frequent closure of schools and colleges. Two male respondents also reported that they were forced to repeat a whole year during their undergraduate studies, not because of poor academic performance, but because they failed to save enough money and pay the admission fees in time to register for the end-of-year examinations. And, unlike any of the male respondents, a few young women mentioned family reasons (more specifically, marriage or domestic duties) for intermitting their studies at post-secondary school level. Delays in young people's educational progress therefore can be linked to a number of obstacles which, for the most part, are beyond the individual's control – be it the poor quality of the public education system in Nepal, the country's political and economic deadlock, or established gender norms.

These complications notwithstanding, all of the 40 research participants were proud of their educational performance and in this context, often noted that their own educational trajectories bore no comparison with the much more basic levels of schooling attained by their parents. On average, their mothers had completed three years and their fathers nine years of schooling. Those parents who had long been settling in the urban Kathmandu Valley had slightly better chances of obtaining an education than those from other parts of the country. Shreya's father, for example, had passed the SLC and her mother could read and write in Nepali, despite the fact that she did not complete primary school. Likewise, Rajit's father also successfully completed secondary school and his

mother completed eight years of schooling. Saroj, in contrast, explained that his mother "does not even know how to write her name". She never had a chance to attain even basic levels of education, because there was no primary school in the village where she lived before getting married to his father at the age of 15. Saroj's father had dropped out of school when he was in grade nine and started to work at road construction sites in northern India in order to help the family to sustain a livelihood. Saroj told me that only three people from his home town had so far managed to obtain a university degree in physics and that he was the only one in his extended family who was studying at master's level.

The case of Saroj's family resonates well with the accounts of most other research participants. The large majority (34 out of 40) of them reported that they were the first in the family or even in the wider community to continue to higher levels of education. The generational disjuncture in terms of people's educational levels has been a key topic of public debates in Nepal in recent years. Kathmandu's English dailies have repeatedly published articles with the title 'generation gap', which warn against the problems and conflicts that arise if the aspirations of educated youth clash with the opinions of the older generation (e.g. Ghimire 2009; Koirala 2010; Singh 2010). However, the young Nepalis I spoke with did not seem to experience the differences between their own and their parents' education trajectories as a source of conflict.

Without the support of their parents, some research participants would have been likely to discontinue their education at lower levels, not least because they would have simply lacked the financial means to cover the costs of their studies. In total, 32 out of 40 respondents explicitly mentioned that their parents had strongly influenced them in their decision to study for a university degree, and financed their educational expenses either in part or in full. According to some respondents, their parents were willing to set aside a substantial share of the household's budget and sometimes even incurred a debt, in order to provide for their children's education. For example, when I asked Tulasi, a 25-year-old Brahmin man, what motivated him to study at university, he replied outright (speaking for himself and his two younger brothers): [E] "Mainly our parents urge us to get more knowledge – at any cost [emphasis]." He moved on to explain that his parents had already sold one third of their land within the past five years to finance their sons' education and that they were likely to give up further shares of the family's property, as his youngest brother was only about to start his undergraduate studies. In comparison with other institutions of higher education in Kathmandu, the public campus charged rather low tuition fees, which, in 2011/ 2012, ranged from Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 45,000 per year depending on the specific course. However, considering that Nepal's average per capita income was

reported to be Rs. 46,000 per annum in 2011 (Kathmandu Post 2011b), even this amount stretched the budgets of most of my respondents' families.

Listening to the stories of the research participants, however, it became evident that parents of all social classes made it a priority to finance their children's education. For many Nepali families, formal education seemed to constitute a kind of investment strategy, which is expected to pay off in the future. This is well illustrated by the answers several respondents gave me when I asked them what motivated them to study at university:

> Ramesh: N "My father supports me a lot. Later they [the parents] are expecting me to return the support. At the moment, they are sending money from home. But when I have my own income, I will send money back [pause] after two or three years, maybe."

> Tej: E "My parents encourage me. They always ask: 'How is the studies going on? How is it going with your studies? What is the marks in the previous exams? And what happens in the next session? When is your final exams? Have you looked for a job?' They always want to know about the job, also because they have spent some money for me."

> Nilima: N "My parents! Mostly my parents encourage us; me and my brother. [speaks faster] 'Your studies are most important! Prioritise your studies! When you will have completed your master's [degree], then you can do any type of job.' My parents always say things like that."

According to the young people I spoke with, their parents frequently expressed the hope that their children would be able to capitalise on their educational credentials by securing a well-paid job in the modern labour market. Such expectations appear to echo the public discourses that accompanied the mobilisation around formal education in Nepal during the second half of the twentieth century (see also Chapter 3). Academic credentials, in particular, are increasingly perceived to be a precondition for gaining access to salaried employment. TU, for example, proclaims that 'the production of skilled manpower essential for the country's development' has been one of its main purposes and objectives since its foundation more than 50 years ago.[22] The first batches of university graduates were indeed easily absorbed into the newly emerging economic sector for tertiary activities, and often occupied respectable posts in the government service or the formal education sector (TU 1996). Those who secured a job in the civil sector during the 1970s and 1980s – most of whom were upper-caste educated men – could be relatively confident about being able to claim a space in Kathmandu's emerging middle class (Liechty 2003). Thus, in the eyes of the parental generation, it still seemed to be highly desirable to obtain a university education in order to embark on a career in the public sector. The following

[22] The mission statement and principal objectives of TU are published on the university's web page. The objective 'to produce skilled manpower necessary for the overall development of Nepal' is listed as the first of the four main purposes of the university. Available online: http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/ [Last accessed October 2, 2011]

conversation I had with Uttam, a 24-year-old Chhetri man, in early December 2011 is particularly instructive in this context.

> Andrea: E "Why did you move to Kathmandu?"
>
> Uttam: E "I moved to Kathmandu to do BBA [Bachelor of Business Administration]. But no one permitted to do my BBA, because I am the oldest son. So I had to finish my education earlier. So I had to do BBS [Bachelor of Business Studies]. That is a three-year course. I completed that."
>
> Andrea: E "Because BBA would have been four years?"
>
> Uttam: E "Yes, BBA is four years and BBS is three years."
>
> Andrea: E "And your family wanted you to just"
>
> Uttam [interrupts]: E "Yes, because I am the oldest son. They [the parents] wanted me to finish my degree as soon as possible and get a job."
>
> Andrea: E "And now that you are doing a two-year master programme, what do your parents say?"
>
> Uttam: E "I decide myself, but I let them know what my plan is for future life. 'I wish I could study economics.' I told them. Both parents, I told. And they said: 'Whatever you want to do, but utilize your time nicely! Don't go waste your potential.' My parents keep on telling me. 'What have you studied for?! Try in the government organisations. Try for *lok sewa* or Nepal Rastra Bank.[23] Prepare yourself for the entry examination. You have lots of free time. Utilize it! Read books and prepare yourself for government organisation.'"
>
> Andrea: E "So, now you pay for the course fees yourself?"
>
> Uttam: E "No, my parents. My parents pay for all my studies; also for my brothers'. My father gets retirement benefits every month. That's why we could come here. But I am also looking for a job. So far, nothing worked out. But when I earn my own income, I will also pay for the fees myself."

Uttam grew up as the oldest of three sons in a town in Sarlahi district and moved to Kathmandu after completing his studies at +2 level in 2006 to continue his education at university level. When his father retired in early 2011, his parents also relocated to Kathmandu to live again with their three sons, who, by then, were all studying at different institutions of higher education in Kathmandu. Uttam's father had been employed as a civil servant at district level his entire working life. Uttam acknowledged that his family had greatly benefitted from the father's regular salary and even after retirement the father's pension continued to be the main source of income for the family. Without the financial

[23] *Lok sewa aayog* is the examination and selection procedure based on which candidates may be appointed to posts in the civil service. Nepal Rastra Bank is the Central Bank of Nepal which is considered to be one of the most prestigious and profitable employers in the public sector.

support of his father, Uttam neither could have come to Kathmandu for his bachelor's degree nor would have been able to finance his graduate studies. At the same time, important decisions Uttam made regarding his own future life – be it the move to Kathmandu, the choice of subject, or the next steps in preparation for the job market – were often a kind of a compromise between Uttam's own ambitions and his parents' expectations. At times when Uttam (in consultation with his family) had to make a decision which was likely to have far-reaching consequences for his educational and occupational career, his potential futures were literally under debate (cf. Johnson-Hanks 2005: 872).

Listening to Saroj, Uttam, and their peers, it became evident that the educational trajectories followed by most young Nepalis are uneven and often unpredictable. This is partly because of conditions beyond the control of the individual. The political and economic situation of Nepal has had adverse effects on the formal education system, which in turn have also filtered through into the everyday life of the students. At the same time, young Nepalis are confronted with multiple and often competing social influences which shape their ideas about their potential future lives. In particular, the encouragements and expectations of parents in combination with the family's financial situation forcefully shape young people's decisions about their educational and occupational careers. From this perspective, the term 'generation gap' which popular media in Nepal likes to dwell on in view of the educational differences between Nepal's youth and the parental generation appears to be misleading. I instead found that the young Nepalis I met made important decisions in compliance with the advice that their parents gave them. In this sense, intergenerational ties are much stronger than the term 'gap' suggests.

In addition, the young Nepalis I spoke with carefully thought about what motivated them and how certain steps would help them to achieve their objectives. In general, they made important decisions only after giving thorough consideration to what was expected from an educated young person like them and what others may consequently come to think about their behaviour and performance. My analysis therefore supports Johnson-Hanks's (2002) argument that variations in young people's life experience are not necessarily a sign of young people's inability to negotiate dominant forces and to build a successful future life. A closer look at some of the vital conjunctures of my respondents' educational careers shows that young people's agency may reside in the ways in which young people are able to account for various social influences and to anticipate the potential consequences of their own behaviour. In so doing, young people foster social relationships, ensure that others' support them, and hence also gain the respect of other members of society.

Destinations for education

Geographical work on higher education reveals that the value attached to educational attainments and, related to this, to student life is often closely bound up with young people's spatial mobilities (e.g. Holdsworth 2009; Waters 2006). This is a particular important point to consider in the context of Nepali society, where to be educated means to have exposure to the world beyond [*para*] (Subedi 1999; see also Chapter 3). Moving for the purpose of attaining an education is an idea which is deeply rooted in Hindu tradition. In the past, young Brahmin men would leave the parental home to stay with a teacher [*guru*] from whom they learned Sanskrit texts and religious practices (Subedi 1999: 130). With the establishment of a modern education system and Nepal's integration into the global economy, however, the destinations for education have changed. More importantly perhaps, new forms of mobility have emerged which make it more likely for educated young Nepalis of both genders and from different socio-spatial backgrounds to explore places which lie beyond the realms of their home communities and which consequently also expose young people to new ideas and influences. In this section, I therefore examine which spatial practices young Nepalis commonly associated with the prospect of becoming an educated person and how related forms of spatial mobility shaped young people's perceptions of self and others and, related to this, their future aspirations.

The public campus as a multifunctional space

The public campus where I conducted this research had a large catchment area. Only four out of the 40 research participants lived or worked in walking distance from the campus. Most of their peers, however, easily took an hour or two depending on traffic to arrive on campus in the morning. On a Sunday in December 2011, I was invited by Namita, a 26-year-old lower-caste Newar woman, to her family's home. On Sundays the office, where Namita worked, was closed, so that she could make more time to show me the place where she grew up and still lived with her parents, her older sister, and her younger brother. The neighbourhood was located on the outskirts in the south of the city, approximately 15 km from campus. After returning in the evening, I noted in my research diary:

> After classes had finished at 9.30 a.m., I met Namita by the campus gate. Namita asked me whether I would prefer to take a tuk-tuk [a three-wheeled, propane powered taxi] rather than walk to the main road. Normally, she would walk, in order to save the Rs. 13.25. The normal fare is Rs. 25, but students with ID cards get a 47 per cent discount. Fares have gone up again last week, due to the petrol shortage, which seems to get worse from day to day. I told Namita I was happy to walk. It took us 20 min to reach the main road. Namita walked at a good pace, but even for her it

> seemed impossible to hurry. You constantly have to watch out for honking motorbikes, the porters with their heavy loads, piles of rubbish by the roadside, and straying dogs. From the main road we took the bus to Satdobato along the Ring Road. Namita showed her student card without being asked for it, when I gave the money to the conductor (Fare: Rs. 8/ Rs. 15). Changed at Satdobato into a super crowded microbus [12 seater Toyota minivan] (Fare: Rs. 18.50/ Rs. 35). Namita and I stood inside squeezed behind the sliding door, while the busboy and two other passengers were hanging outside the open sliding door. After four or five stops – each time Namita and I had to get off to let other passengers get off – we finally managed to get a seat. The traffic was less thick now, which meant that the driver started speeding. I still haven't got used to these roller coaster rides. We had to change one more time into another microbus (Fare: Rs. 13.25/ Rs. 25). By the time we reached Godavari, it was 11.30 a.m. Walking for another 15 min past some fields and newly built three-storeyed houses, we finally reached the house of Namita's family. [...] I was stuck in traffic on the way back around 6 p.m. So much noise and dust. I was starring out of the open back of the tuck-tuck into the blinding lights of the cars, motorbikes, and trucks behind us in the traffic chaos. It was starting to get dark. I am totally exhausted. No idea how Namita manages to make this trip on a daily basis.

The daily commute between students' homes, the campus, and their workplaces could not only be exhausting, but it was also comparatively costly and time-consuming. The next time I met Namita and four of her girlfriends on campus, I asked them whether it was only me who felt that it was quite a struggle to get around the city on public transport. The young women confirmed that it was sometimes not possible for them to go to campus as regularly as they would have liked to because of a lack of time. Two of them also specifically expressed concerns over the constant increase in the prices for petrol and gas, as fares for public transport significantly cut students' budgets. On other occasions, it was impossible for them to reach the campus because public transport was once again affected by a strike. These difficulties notwithstanding, they assured me that they tried to go to campus on a regular basis. In an interview I conducted two days later with Roshni (one of the five friends) she picked up on the topic again and explained in more detail: [N]

> "The campus is the place where we can meet our friends and talk to different people. Otherwise, there is no time for that. On Saturdays, when the campus and office is closed, then my family wants me to give time and to stay at home. And I can't go out with friends in the evening, because people would think badly about me. [later in the conversation] It's not because I am thinking of a particular job or a particular position. I just do it for myself. Sometimes it is difficult to manage the time for my studies because of family and everything. But even then, I have my self-motivation and I want to do my master's [degree]. [...] I have personally changed a lot through education. If I had not studied, I would not be the person I am today. One should not only stay at home, but also interact with people, share ideas, keep up to date and develop your own opinions."

Roshni, aged 30 in 2011, grew up as the older of two daughters in an upper-caste Newar family in a northern part of the city. Since her marriage in 2005, she was living with her husband's family in a residential area northeast of the city centre, almost at the

opposite end of the Kathmandu Valley from Namita's home. As a young wife and daughter-in-law, she had first struggled to continue her studies after completing her bachelor's degree. In 2010, however, she enrolled for a graduate programme and since then was attending classes regularly. Nobody in her extended family had obtained a university degree. Even Roshni's husband had discontinued his studies at the intermediate level. As Roshni made explicit in the interview, she liked going to campus not only because she was keen to obtain a master's degree, but also because she otherwise had little opportunity to spend time with her friends. Similar to Roshni, more than half of the 40 research participants (11 females/ 11 males) explicitly referred to their friends, when I asked them what they liked about the public campus.

With the expansion of the formal education system in the 1980s and the 1990s, schools emerged as important sites which brought together children of both genders and of different caste/ ethnic origins (e.g. Ahearn 2001a; Skinner 1990; Valentin 2005). Until the end of the twentieth century, accessing higher levels of education, however, remained the privilege of (predominantly male) urban middle-class youth. At that time, young women, like Namita or Roshni, who came from a lower middle-class background, were unlikely to continue their education at post-secondary school level, and almost certain to discontinue their studies after marriage. This point forcefully emerges from the ethnographic study Liechty (2003) conducted in Kathmandu in the early 1990s. He writes that "Kathmandu's thousands of schools and campuses are physical spaces largely of, by, and for the middle class" (ibid.: 264). In this context, Liechty furthermore argues that being part of educated youth was not only a middle-class privilege, but also a gender privilege (ibid.: 233).

The conversations I had with university students in Nepal and the observations I made on and around the public campus in Kathmandu, however, suggest that, in 2011-2012, the tertiary education sector was no longer the domain of young men belonging to the urban middle class, but attracted young people from diverse social backgrounds. This trend was reflected in the friendship ties that research participants built and nurtured on and around campus. Social differences – be it in terms of young people's caste, gender, or class background – seemed to be of little importance for interacting with peers in the classrooms or by the tea stalls. The case of Dipendra is particularly illustrative in this context. Dipendra was a young Dalit man, born in 1984. In an interview that I conducted with Dipendra, in October 2011, he told me about the forms of caste-based discrimination he had experienced during his childhood: [E]

> "This caste system is deeply rooted in people's minds and it takes a long time to change it. I have faced so many discrimination in the name of caste. I was not allowed into someone else's house. Also in school at lunchtime, I was always the last who got his plate of food and some boys would refuse to sit next to me. But I have

> noticed the situation seems to be increasingly improved. Education has a big impact on the way we think and interact with others. If I had left my studies in [grade] five or six, I would probably be doing something in the village now. Or even if I would have come here with my family, but would not have continued my education, then I might just be helping my father in his work. But I would not have got the chance to come here [to campus] and meet my friends. I don't see any discriminating attitude among young people. Nowadays, I can go to their home, inside my friends' houses – perhaps not in the kitchen."

Dipendra moved together with his parents and his two siblings to the city from a village on the rim of the Kathmandu Valley when he was ten years old. He greatly appreciated having the opportunity to study at university in Kathmandu and to participate in student life on and around campus, mainly because of the cross-caste interactions it facilitated. I often observed Dipendra and his classmates from different caste backgrounds sharing a snack by the tea stalls. In particular, I recall an instance where Dipendra and his classmates were talking about their preferences for tea. Dipendra had never tried the salty tea, which one of his classmates, an upper-caste Hindu girl, was having that moment. The girl freely offered Dipendra a sip from her glass before she drank the remaining tea herself. This was a remarkable gesture, considering that, in Hindu tradition, water is believed to be a transmitter of impurity. On a different occasion, Dipendra and his best friend, a young Brahmin man from Kathmandu, organised a day trip for the whole class to a picnic site outside the city. Dipendra was known for such initiatives and consequently very popular among his fellow students.

The cases of Roshni and Dipendra suggest that participating in higher education formed part of a wider identity-making project.[24] This was of particular importance for the growing number of students from social groups who previously had been discriminated against because of their caste, gender, or geographical origin, and therefore were still underrepresented at university level. The friendships and social networks these young people built on campus helped them in their attempts to reposition themselves in wider society. The very experience of being liked and respected by their peers gave these young people some confidence in their capacity to overcome social boundaries around which the lives of previous generations of Nepalis had been largely structured. The ways in which young people from diverse social background interacted on campus also raised young people's hopes that in the future a person's status would be defined less based on caste/ ethnic or gender identities than based on the person's educational achievements and contributions to the community.

At the same time, a trend away from social discrimination toward more equal opportunities for all young people of Nepal seemed to be primarily noticeable within the

[24] Based on the cases of these two research participants, I have presented this argument in a somewhat more condensed way in an article on intergenerationality and the values of higher education in Nepal (Kölbel 2013).

public domain. Dipendra, for example, acknowledged that he was unlikely to be allowed into other people's kitchens, which indicates that people still upheld ideas of impurity associated with lower castes in the domestic sphere. In a similar vein, Roshni was acutely aware that it was socially unaccepted for a young woman to socialise with peers, and especially with young men, in public places unless there were obvious reasons for her to do so. The university campus provided such a physical space, as it stood for the honourable status and the social values associated with formal education. The daily commute from home to campus, regardless of how cumbersome it often was, helped young people to set themselves apart from their own social circles, as being one of the few members of their home communities who had managed to advance to higher levels of education and who held a student ID card. More importantly perhaps, the campus was a place removed from young people's places of residence. As other human geographers have argued, educational institutions tend to constitute a kind of spatial separation of the younger from the older generation (e.g. Hopkins and Pain 2007; Vanderbeck 2007). According to the research participants, their parents had never been inside a university building. Likewise, I also never saw somebody on campus, who was not a student or a member of staff. Being somewhat removed from the supervision of the parental generation, young people seemed to feel more comfortable to interact with their peers and, in so doing, to cross the social boundaries that ran along gender, caste/ ethnic, and class lines (see also Dyson 2010). For the young Nepalis I spoke with, the university campus was more than an educational institution in its conventional sense. They conceived of the campus a multifunctional space of learning, where they could gain new ideas not only (and perhaps not even primarily) inside the classrooms, but also through friendships and informal interactions with their peers.

Becoming somebody in Kathmandu

A Nepali proverb that research participants who had grown up in parts of the country outside the Kathmandu Valley often told me runs along the following lines: "To make a dog clever, it has to be sent to the jungle. To make a son clever, he has to be sent to the city." In recent years, this saying seems to have further gained currency. Estimates suggest that by 2010/ 2011 urban migrants accounted for half of the valley's total population (CBS 2011: 135 Table 8.1). Out of the 40 young Nepalis I spoke with 22 had moved to Kathmandu within the past five to six years, among them nine young women. When I asked these young people why they decided to come to Kathmandu, four young men said that they migrated primarily for work purposes, and one young woman moved to join her husband's family in Kathmandu after getting married. However, for the large majority of the young

urban migrants I spoke with, it was important to emphasise that they came to Kathmandu for educational purposes. The following extracts from separate interviews I conducted over the course of November 2011 till January 2012 exemplify young people's reasoning for their move to Kathmandu:

> Binod: N "I came to Kathmandu to study. That was the only thing I had on my mind: Come to campus, get admission, and study. That is it. I did not come because of my friends. They did help me at first. If the friends would not have been here, my parents would have helped me. But I had [emphasis] to come to Kathmandu to study. In the village, the quality of education needs to be improved. Only very few people can study there [in Dang district]. The situation needs to improve, because education is absolutely necessary for a society to prosper and develop. If we focus on education, there will be good progress."

> Ramesh: N "We don't have a good college there [in Gulmi district]. So for higher education, we have to come to the capital. And if you are good at school level, of course, you want to study further. See, only few come to Kathmandu, the ones who have done well in school. Otherwise, they stay in the village to work in the fields. They don't study, the ones who are involved in farming. They flunked out."

> Nilima: N "I completed SLC level in Jumla and then I came here to continue at +2 and bachelor's level. [...] There is also a campus in Jumla. But people don't think very highly of it. So everybody told me to come here, because higher education institutions here are better than the one in Jumla. [...] For those youth who stay in Jumla life is so difficult. My family is somewhat better off than other families. So my parents sent me here for my studies. But my friend from school, she dropped out before completing tenth grade. Now she already got married. Her life is so difficult, so much more difficult."

> Deepa: E "My parents encouraged me. I respect them a lot for that, for giving the opportunity to study in Kathmandu. If I see back on my life, past life, I see my friends where they are now. Most of my friends have already gotten married and some have two or three children. And the friends who are in the same position as I am I can count on one hand [holds up four fingers]. […] I grew up in a remote [emphasis] area in Sunsari district. In that place, most children have to work, like cut grass and wood and herd the cow and goat. In that place, children will have already gotten married and all. Most of! Most of them! But when I was in grade five, I moved with my family to Morang [district], Biratnagar, small city, you may know. I studied there up to +2 level. Because of moving to another place I could continue my education. It is not easy for a person of this geography, I mean from a village, to make such decision or to do this. Geography certainly determines."

As these four respondents made explicit, spatial disparities in terms of access to and quality of education remain problematic in Nepal, specifically at higher levels of education. In more recent years, some progress has been made with the establishment of new institutions in previously neglected regions:[25] between 2007 and 2011 the number of TU

[25] For 2007, the figures were retrieved from a study conducted by Pramod Bhatta and his colleagues (2008: 248). For 2011, I refer to the lists of affiliated colleges and constituent campuses available from the web page of Tribhuvan University: http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/ [Last accessed October 2, 2011]

colleges in Far-Western and Mid-Western Nepal more than doubled. Nonetheless, the geographical distribution of campuses and availability of disciplinary diversity remains highly unequal. For example, Binod, Ramesh, and Nilima could not have studied the subjects of their choice in their home districts. Binod and Ramesh were enrolled in the MSc programme in physics and Nilima was studying at the department of sociology. The colleges in the districts of Dang, Gulmi, and Jumla, however, only offered courses in management and teacher training at the certificate or bachelor's level. These insights indicate that, in terms of both quality and quantity, higher education in Nepal continues to be highly centred on the urban Kathmandu Valley and a few other cities, such as Pokhara in Kaski district and Biratnagar in Morang district (see also Bhatta et al. 2008: 248–249).

At the same time, it became apparent that education-related migration to Kathmandu cannot be exclusively ascribed to a kind of cost-benefit calculation. In our conversations about respondents' experience of migrating to Kathmandu, all of them mentioned that they had been strongly influenced by their families and/ or friends in their decision to move to Kathmandu. Nine out of the 22 respondents gratefully acknowledged their parents for supporting them morally as well as financially. In addition, 14 out of the 22 young urban migrants mentioned that they relied on the support of kin and non-kin peers (i.e. siblings, cousins, and friends) in order to find a place to stay in Kathmandu and to decide about where and what to study. These peer networks were of particularly importance for young people, who could not rely on the support of their parents. This was, for example, the case for Chitra, a 36-year-old Tamang woman. I first was introduced to Chitra by another research participant in November 2011. At that time, Chitra told me that she grew up as the oldest of four siblings in a village in Parsa district located at the border with India. She attended a public campus in Birganj, the district's headquarters, where she completed the degree of Bachelor of Education before moving to Kathmandu in 2009. When Sujata and I met Chitra again in February 2012 for a follow-up interview, she told us more about how she had come to Kathmandu and what had changed since then.

> Andrea: N "Has anything changed for you since you moved to Kathmandu?"
>
> Chitra: N "Yes, everything! [laughs] Like, my parents. At first, they did not believe that I would ever reach this level of education. I had started studying too late. I was 15 years old when I joined grade six ['normal age' is nine years]."
>
> Sujata: N "Is it?"
>
> Chitra: N "Before my life was full of struggle. I had studied up to grade three, but then dropped out of school because of work. The economic situation of my family was very poor. That's why I could not continue with my studies but had to work. But I wanted to study and after three years I re-enrolled in grade five. I was the oldest and tallest in the class. I felt very shy. But my cousin [the son of her mother's sister] supported me a lot. He became my strength, my backbone. I studied and made some

progress. At the beginning, I just knew the ABC. I did not know plus [addition] or minus [subtraction]. Imagine, that kind of person admitted to grade five! But my cousin supported me."

Sujata: N "And your parents? Did they support you when you were at school?"

Chitra: N "No. They used to think narrowly. 'She is a girl and she has to get married. She has to have a household.' And even I didn't use to think about any other thing. I just thought 'I cannot do anything.' Only when my cousin brought us [her and her younger brother] to Kathmandu, I got used to interact with the outer world. Then, I felt like 'I am a woman and I have become a role model'. This kind of thought came spontaneously. I thought like 'I have to become somebody'. Now, I have big dreams. Marriage is not the only thing. Previously, I was not able to think besides marriage. Now, what I think is 'I can do everything. I can still get married later in my life'."

Andrea: N "And what do your parents say now?"

Chitra: N "Now, they are happy. They are proud of me. I am the only [emphasis] daughter of our Tamang community to study at master's level. This makes them [the parents] very proud. Whenever I go home – when talking even in groups, it is my habit to talk by moving my hands. I got used to this while I was studying at university. My father is very happy, when he sees me like that. By coming to Kathmandu, I have made my own identity. My father's name is Ram Bir. But I am not Ram Bir's daughter but Ram Bir is Chitra Maya's father. This thought only came after I had come to Kathmandu and studied at university."

The memories Chitra recalled about her childhood resemble the lives of many girls and young women, who grew up in the rural parts of Nepal (cf. Lind Petersen 2011). For children of poorer families, it remains difficult to fully concentrate on their schooling, as a rural childhood routinely entails various forms of work in the household and on the fields besides attending school (see also Dyson 2014). In addition, it is common for girls from poorer backgrounds to get married before the age of 18, which is the legal age in Nepal for both man and woman to marry with parental consent. While figures available for the year 2012 suggest that the average age for marriage in Nepal is 19 years for women and 21 for men, the same survey also shows that child marriage is still commonly practised among caste and ethnic groups in the Terai (Maharjan et al. 2012: 22 Table 22). In the case of these social groups, more than half of the female survey respondents were married before they turned 18. In addition, child marriage is a highly gendered practice, considering that girls are twice as likely as boys to be married before the age of 18 (ibid.).

In view of these figures, it is evident that Chitra was more an exception than the rule. In her case, the support of her cousin seemed to have been of crucial importance for broadening her horizon of opportunity. Without her cousin's encouragements, Chitra would have been unlikely to even imagine the possibility of continuing to higher levels of education and of studying in the cities of Birganj and Kathmandu. At the same time, she seemed to have departed from the widespread ideal of a future life as a wife and mother to

which many young Nepali women aspire. Chitra certainly had significantly delayed marriage, considering that she was still unmarried at the age of 36. Chitra's account implies that there is not one single way for a young Nepali woman (and for a young person, more generally) to gain the respect of others and to make their place in society. In addition, her story is a telling example for the fact that young people's lives may evolve in an unpredictable manner, as young people get exposed to new ideas over time and across space (see also Johnson-Hanks 2002).

Within the wider field of migration studies, it is well recognised that kin networks of migrants and non-migrants can significantly lower the risks involved in relocating to a largely unfamiliar place, making it more likely for non-migrants to become spatially mobile as well (e.g. Castles and Miller 2009; Goldin et al. 2011: 105–106). According to the young urban migrants, peer networks were of great significance not only for those young people, who followed their relatives to Kathmandu, but also for 'first-movers' – most of whom were firstborns or male relatives. In this context, Saroj, the young Chhetri man I have already introduced at the beginning of the chapter, and Deepa, a 25-year-old Brahmin woman, expressed very similar ideas in separate interviews.

> Saroj: [N] "In order to come to Kathmandu, I had to become a student as well as a guardian. One has to consider all responsibilities. Those who are from here will be staying under their parents' care. And they are likely to be spoiled. But outsiders know better that they have to take all the responsibilities of their parents and everything. I have so many responsibilities. I am responsible not only for my parents but also for my uncle's family, as they only have daughters, no son. Therefore, I have the responsibility for all. One of their daughters is now staying with me here [in Kathmandu]."

> Deepa: [E] "I have taken my three sisters with me here to make my father easy to handle the family and I am also working here. […] When I came to Kathmandu, that time there was no one to give me any support. And now, if my younger sisters or brothers face such problems, there is me! Because I come to Kathmandu and also brought my sisters here, people at home are saying: 'She is like son and doing the way sons do'."

In Nepali tradition, the oldest son is commonly expected to take responsibility for the family. Sending the son to Kathmandu, which is perceived to be centre of development and progress in the country, has been part of people's livelihood strategies for several decades (see also Chapter 3). This explains why Deepa was said to behave more like a son than a daughter. At the same time, sending a son or (more recently) a daughter to Kathmandu had significant financial implications for the family; in some cases even other members of the community were asked to contribute towards the expenses. Saroj's parents, for example, could only afford to pay for about half of his costs of living in Kathmandu. To cover the over half, Saroj relied on the contributions of other members of the family and of the wider community in his home village. Similarly, Deepa reported that

her father had even taken out a loan for Rs. 10 lakh (one million) which, for the most part, was spent on the formal education of the four daughters of the family. None of the young urban migrants I spoke with in 2011/ 2012 was in the position to pay their parents back in the near future. The more important it was for these young people to give back to their families and the wider community in the form of social returns. These young people often perceived of themselves as 'guardians' or role models, who helped younger siblings and other peers from their home communities to move to Kathmandu as well.

Taken together, the various accounts of the young urban migrants I met in Kathmandu show that the move to the capital city increased young people's chances of obtaining a university education as well as of gaining social distinction. Regardless of whether these young people felt encouraged by their parents to move to Kathmandu or not, they all argued that in the process of relocating to the city they had also advanced along the social hierarchy. First, education-related migration allowed these young people to distinguish themselves from the less educated parental generation. This point forcefully emerges from Chitra's narratives. Chitra emphasised that she was not respected for being her father's daughter, but that her family had gained social prestige [*ijjat*] because of Chitra's exceptional performance and because she had acquired the status of an educated person. Second, the young urban migrants I spoke with also sought to set themselves apart from their less educated peers. As emphasised by Ramesh and Binod (quoted above), those young people who do not succeed in school stay back in the village and engage in less prestigious forms of work, such as farming. Likewise, Nilima and Deepa discussed the benefits of an urban university education with reference to the difficulties young women face in their home communities, if they do not continue to higher levels of education. Finally, these young people were acutely aware that, in Nepali society, social privileges tend to go hand in hand with social obligations. Without the support of their parents and peers, it would have been much more difficult, if not even unimaginable for these young people to obtain an urban university education. Living up to the expectations of their parents, peers, and the wider community, therefore, was an important aspect of young migrants' attempts to capitalise on their migration experience in order to maintain and further improve their reputation.

Aiming abroad

When hanging out together on and around campus, students were often talking about their plans for the future and, especially, for the time after the completion their master's degree. Often such conversations centred on young people's aspiration for going abroad for further studies (see also the introduction to this chapter). The prospect of obtaining an

international education was also one of the key points for discussion during the interviews I conducted with individual students: Out of the 40 research participants, 32 indicated that they aspire to go abroad on a student visa. To a certain extent, my presence may have encouraged students to bring up the same topic over and over again, as some students seemed to hope that I could provide some 'secret' insider advice on how to get a scholarship or on how to get admission to universities in Europe. However, the topic of studying abroad was not only of importance for the young Nepalis studying on the public campus where I conducted this research, and hence cannot solely be ascribed to aspects of positionality. My impression was confirmed when I read through a newspaper article, in which a local observer writes: "Ask any +2 or college graduate on their future plans and the most likely answer that you are going to get is 'further study abroad'" (KC 2009).

Most of the young Nepalis who go abroad on a student visa belong to the urban propertied class. Reporting on a qualitative study of Nepali student migrants in the US, Bandita Sijapati and Margaret Hermann (2012) indicate that the majority of these full-time university students were young men, who grew up in Kathmandu and previously attended one of the more reputable schools in the capital city (see also Valentin 2012a). Until the end of the twentieth century, most young Nepalis who aspired to study abroad would have attended one of the elite schools in Kathmandu, namely the US-accredited Lincoln School, the British School, or Budhanilkantha School – the latter was established in 1972 as a joint venture between the governments of Nepal and the UK. Since the 1990s, however, the privatisation of education in Nepal has led to a rapid increase in the number of schools and colleges in Kathmandu which brand themselves as 'international'. These educational institutions, all of which have been established by Nepali private entrepreneurs, pride themselves on imparting excellent English language skills. Their curricula often lead to A-levels rather than the Nepali SLC and they usually provide extra guidance to their students in terms of career counselling and alumni support. In view of these characteristics, it becomes evident that these new international private schools largely emerged in response to growing aspirations of the upper middle class for an international education at a university in a Western English-speaking country (cf. Hayden 2011).

For most of the Nepali children who have graduated from these schools this hope has been fulfilled. A former student of Budhanilkantha School estimates that already during the early 2000s more than 40 per cent of the school's alumni were living in the US (Sherpa 2002). This trend seems to have further accelerated in recent years. Figures that I obtained from a similar well-established private school in Kathmandu revealed that, in recent years, up to 80 per cent of its graduates were studying or had already graduated from a foreign university, primarily in the US, Europe, or Australia. The foundation for

obtaining a foreign degree, therefore, seemed to be laid already at lower levels of schooling in Nepal. However, the price of this stepping stone abroad is high. An article published in a Nepali daily newspaper in 2009 lists the tuition fees charged by some of the private international schools in Kathmandu (Dhakal 2009). Leaving aside other costs, such as admission fees, the schools charged at this time between Rs. 5,555 and Rs. 13,000 per month at secondary level. This means that school fees amounted on an annual basis to up to 1,900 USD, i.e. more than double Nepal's average per capita income in 2011. Despite these substantial monetary preconditions, there are long waiting lists for those children who have not yet secured one of the much desired admission spots due to the schools' limited capacities. Many Nepali parents are obviously willing to invest heavily in their children's primary and secondary education if it facilitates a smooth transition into foreign universities.

Whilst these schools were unaffordable for the young Nepalis I spoke with, these young people were no less exposed to the appeal to study abroad. Gigantic billboards showing images of successful university graduates and the flags of Anglophone countries were prominently displayed along the city's main roads (see Figure 4.1). The daily newspapers published in Kathmandu usually reserved an entire page for colourful announcements of international education fairs promising 'free counselling and spot admission'. Even the walls of the buildings on campus were papered with flyers promoting preparation courses for the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) with a '6.5 guarantee'.[26] Behind this immense marketing machine are international education consultancies, which offer a variety of services, ranging from language test preparation courses to assistance with admission and immigration procedures. In recent years, these private agents have mushroomed across the whole city.

Radha Adhikari (2010) refers to the industry which has emerged in Kathmandu around the prospect of studying abroad as a 'dream-trap'. She found that many of the Nepali migrants she interviewed in the UK reported that they had relied on services of education consultancies in Kathmandu only to face much disappointment upon arrival in the UK. Following up on her observation, I was also interested to find out to what extent the promises made by the 'study abroad' industry were capable of being fulfilled, and discovered that many of the slogans promoting foreign degrees and universities abroad were indeed unfounded. Universities advertised as 'world best education' were not even listed in the 2011 global university rankings of *Times Higher Education* and *ARWU,* and

[26] The IELTS is scored on a nine-band scale, with each band corresponding to a specified competence in English. A 6.5 score is taken to indicate a competent usage of English. In the UK, for example, most universities require a minimum score of between 5.0 and 7.0. The Australian Immigration Authorities require applicants for permanent residency to score at least 6.0 in each IELTS test section.

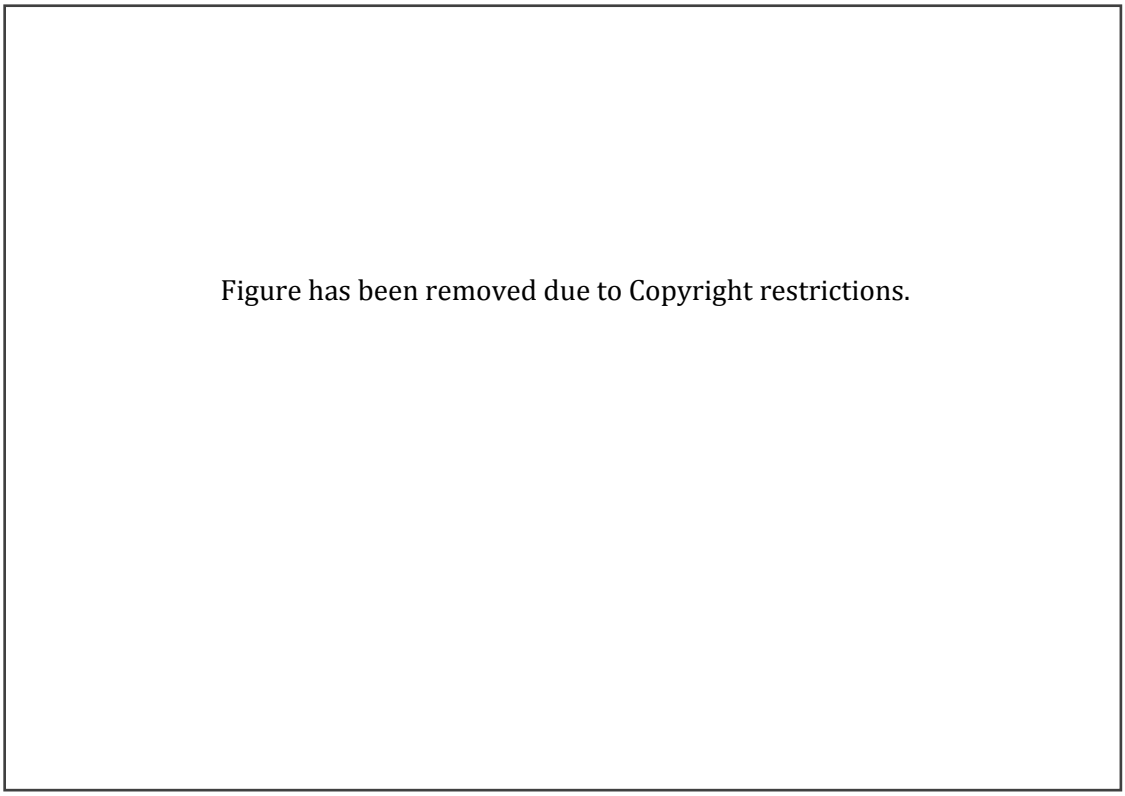

Figure 4.1 Advertisements of international education consultancies in local newspapers and different parts of the city, Kathmandu, 2011.

were only included at the bottom end of national rankings.[27] Certificates which were supposed to 'fast-track your career' turned out to be more in the nature of vocational training diplomas rather than academic credentials. 'Study on a full scholarship in Germany' only meant that universities in continental Europe tend to charge no tuition fees.[28] Consequently, many of the Nepali migrants whom Adhikari (2010) interviewed in the UK reported that they had relied on services of education consultancies in Kathmandu only to face much disappointment upon arrival in the UK. The education consultancies, nonetheless, appeared to succeed in attracting large numbers of aspiring youth, considering that this specific branch of the private service sector continues to flourish.

The young Nepalis I spoke with in Kathmandu, however, seemed to be cautiously aware that international education consultancies tended to make misleading promises.

[27] The university rankings were accessed via the following web pages: Times Higher Education http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2010-11/world-ranking, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) http://www.shanghairanking.com/ARWU2011.html, and Webometrics Ranking http://www.webometrics.info/en [Last accessed June 22, 2012]

[28] I base these claims on a brief content analysis of advertisements published by international education consultancies in three English dailies (*Kathmandu Post*, *The Himalayan Times*, and *Republica*) which I collected almost every day during my one-month pilot trip to Kathmandu in March/ April 2011. I also took into consideration the websites of six Kathmandu-based education consultancies and the photos of ten billboards taken in different parts of the city.

For the most part, these young people were quite sceptical about these private service providers, as the following examples show:

> Arjun: E "But they are not advisable from the official offices. When I went to the USEF [United States Education Foundation], at that time, they said: 'You go to Putalisadak [street in Kathmandu known for a large number of education consultancies] – one of these institutes where you pay money and they will be sending you into college. But that's not the case. They are just using your illusions for their business.'"

> Nischal: N "[On the flyer] it was written that 6.5 is guaranteed. This does not really happen. So I asked if it is possible to get 6.5 guaranteed. If I don't know English and it is difficult for me to learn the language, then how can I possibly get 6.5?! [Recalls his phone call with the education consultant] 'You can come and see our class.' 'I won't talk to you. I only want to talk to the teacher, if you please allow me to meet him.' It will be better if I talk directly with the teacher. Then, I can speak specifically about my issues. The consultancy is anyway just a medium."

> Dharana: N "Consultancies have opened like in every home. That happened recently only! It was not like that before. Now if you walk along the road after every third or fourth house, there is a consultancy. 'Do you want to go abroad? No problem! Come to our consultancy!' [Dharana imitates a hawker and we burst out laughing]. First that urge came, like everybody suddenly wanted to go abroad. The consultancies saw they could make a profit out of this. So, now they are everywhere."

These three research participants critically questioned the validity of the information spread by the education consultancies and even ridiculed the private agents for being profit-orientated. While other research participants were less outspoken in their criticism, there seemed to be a broad agreement that international education consultancies were not a very reliable source of information about foreign degree programmes. It, therefore, seemed to be contradictory that half of the 32 research participants, who aspired to study abroad, had already taken or intended to take a preparation course with one of the private agents. Arjun, for example, was participating in a private course in preparation for the Graduate Record Examinations (GRE), a standardised admission test required by most graduate schools in the US. Likewise, Nischal attended weekly tutorials with the aim to improve his English language skills so that he would score sufficient points in the IELTS to start the application process for a student visa. Similar to other research participants, Arjun and Nischal felt quite confident that they would go abroad for further studies at some point in the future. However, neither of them seemed to know yet for which university or even for which country they wanted to apply. This apparent paradox links to the fact that educational marketing, as Dharana argued, was primarily an after-effect rather than the underlying reason for the upward trend in international student migration from Nepal.

Talking to young people in Kathmandu, I gained the impression that most of them aspire to study abroad, because they tried to conform to or rather keep up with their

peers. In the interviews, more than half of the 40 research participants explicitly referred to their friends, when I asked them with whom they talked about their plans for the future. The following examples are extracts from initial interviews and some follow-up conversations I had with research participants between December 2011 and February 2012.

> Gyanendra: N "With friends. I think, mainly we do what our colleagues, our friends say. [pause] And also, with the family. But generally, we give priority to what our friends say."
>
> Dharana: E "*sāthikolāi lāi ma* [laughs and continues in English] Means, whatever the friends do I followed them suit."
>
> Karuna: N "With my friends. Like, if it is about where one should reach, then I talk with my friends. If it is about the household, then I talk with my family. But about one's life, it is better to ask educated people. Isn't it? When studying in school or at college, we make many friends. They will tell to do like this or to do like that. It is with friends with whom one talks about this is happening and now this kind of thing is coming."
>
> Rajit: N "I think when talking about the future one needs to speak with people of the same [educational] level. Like, family certainly would not know. Most of them would not know. Therefore, as we continue to higher level, either we have to take initiative and search on the internet or we get inspiration from our peers from college. I think so."

These statements imply that the advice of the parental generation was increasingly taken to be of little relevance, as young people's lives seemed to take place under markedly different circumstances than those of their parents. Narratives about a new and different future weave through most of the conversations I had with young educated Nepalis. To the extent that the majority of research participants were among the first few in their families or even in the wider community to continue to higher levels of education, these young people indeed can be said to assume a kind of pioneering role. However, especially within the urban Kathmandu Valley, where the density of institutions of tertiary education is particularly high, it was no longer uncommon for peers – whether siblings, friends, classmates, or partners – to study at university level. An academic degree in and of itself, therefore, seemed to be increasingly insufficient for young people in Kathmandu to distinguish themselves from their peers and, in so doing, to reproduce their reputation as a knowledgeable and successful person in the future. However, an additional educational credential in combination with the experience of living in a 'more developed' country promised to be a sure-fire route to upward social mobility, in particular because an international education was closely associated with the practices of more privileged social groups and specifically with Kathmandu's upper middle class (cf. Waters 2006; see also Chapter 3).

In recent years, stories of diasporic Nepalis have entered into the daily lives of non-migrants living in Kathmandu to the extent that everybody living in the city seems to know somebody who has been or is presently abroad (see also Kunreuther 2006). However, in the conversations I had with research participants, it became apparent that none of them knew of relative or classmate, who was studying in a foreign country. Rather, they explained that they kept in contact with Nepalis living in the US, Australia, and Europe via Facebook. While internet access remains problematic for the majority of Nepal's population, the proliferation of mobile phone services in the country's urban centres allows an increasing number of Nepalis to bypass certain constrains, such as unreliable internet connections, costly computer equipment and long hours of power cuts, and to gain access to online media. Available statistics suggest that 75 per cent of Facebook users in Nepal are between 18 and 34 years old[29], which is precisely the age group my respondents belonged to. Out of the 40 young people I got to know better, 35 had a Facebook account and most of them used it on a regular basis. To what extent the stories and images shared among migrant and non-migrant young Nepalis via online social media provided a holistic picture of life abroad remained questionable. Prompted on these contacts, most respondents did not know important details, such as in which city their Facebook friends were living, which subject they were studying, or which university they were attending. Over the course of our conversations, it often became apparent that most research participants had not been in close contact with their Facebook friends before these moved abroad. These acquaintances were rather based on loose ties as distant relatives, former colleagues, or friends' friends. These insights into the ways in which young Nepalis in Kathmandu were globally connected through the virtual space lend support to a recent study by Francis Collins (2012), who has worked with South Korean students in New Zealand. Collins found that while informal interactions within cyberspace appeared to be a more trusted source of information than official promotion websites, they, nonetheless, produced and circulated a rather idealised imaginary of the desired country of destination. Nevertheless, the emergence of modern social media has certainly an impact on young people's future aspirations. As one respondent asserted: E "All want to go to America! And with this Facebook now, they see their friends who have gone driving a car after six months only and so they think: 'Oh, then I also have to go.'"

Based on these insights into the formation of young Nepalis' aspiration for continuing their education in a foreign country, I contend that the trend in international student migration from Nepal is unlikely to ebb away in the near future. As a result of the expansion of the formal education sector in Nepal during the second half of the twentieth

[29] The statistics on Facebook usage in Nepal were retrieved from the web page of a global social media analyst. Available online: http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/nepal [Last accessed August 22, 2013]

century, it has become easier for young people from across Nepali society to become spatially mobile in various ways and across different scales: the daily commute from home to campus, education-related migration from the rural parts of the country to the capital city, and a higher degree of global connectivity facilitated by technological innovations. On the one hand, these different forms of mobility have enabled the young Nepalis I spoke with to demonstrate that they belonged to newly educated younger generation. This, in turn, meant that these young people were commonly thought to be particularly capable of building a prosperous future life for themselves, their families, and wider society. On the other hand, higher levels of mobility among the younger generation also gave rise to new and even more ambitious plans for the future. Whenever young people travelled from their home to the campus and back, they were exposed to the marketing campaigns of the international education consultancies. More importantly, in the course of moving to Kathmandu and settling into the urban society or simply by attending the lectures on campus, young Nepalis came into contact with peers from diverse social backgrounds. In this sense, young people's spatial movements facilitated social interactions based on which young Nepalis were able to gain an idea of how they were performing in comparison with their peers. Young people's higher potential for spatial mobility, therefore, directly links to the emergence of new ideas and aspirations for the future.

Conclusion: Youth as society's hope for a new and different future

An in-depth analysis of young people's reflections on important decisions they made in relation to their educational careers reveals that established notions of social respectability strongly shaped the perceptions and aspirations of Nepal's younger generation. With the expansion of the country's formal education sector, however, new avenues have opened up for young people from different socio-spatial backgrounds to advance their social status. As a result, established life trajectories specific to people's gender and caste/ ethnicity have become obscured. By framing such critical decision-making situations as vital conjunctures, it becomes possible to grasp this curious combination of social pressures that bear down hard on young people but simultaneously open up new opportunities for young people to develop a sense of agency.

A closer look at the potential futures under debate during such critical durations helps to identify the various social influences that shape young people's hopes and ideas. In our conversations about the opportunities associated with the status of an educated person, young Nepalis commonly referred to their parents, relatives, peers, and other members of their own communities. They also related to traditional norms and beliefs, public discourses about the purpose of formal education, and images and ideas circulated

by global media. These social influences provided important points of reference for the young Nepalis I spoke with and often opened up new opportunities which otherwise would have been inaccessible or even unthinkable for these young people. At the same time, the hopes which parents attached to their children's educational attainments did not necessarily correspond to the ideas young people obtained from their friends or through online interactions. Consequently, it could be challenging for young people to negotiate these different social influences and to decide which educational and occupational pathway they wanted to follow.

In general, research participants gave priority to the guidance and advice of their parents and other relatives, not least because it was the family that secured and anchored young people. However, there were also situations where parents were unable to relate to the experiences of their children, with the result that their advice sometimes seemed to be of little relevance for the younger generation. Parents were often physically removed from the places around which the lives of young people in Kathmandu were organised – be it the campus, the city, or cyberspace. With respect to more recent developments, specifically technological modernisation, educational expansion, and global migration trends, young people consequently relied on their peers as a main point of reference. The young Nepalis I spoke with anxiously traced how they compared to their peers, also because in the context of Nepal's *ijjat*-economy such comparisons revealed much about their chances of gaining social respect.

From a geographical perspective, it is important to note that aspirations for social mobility are closely tied up with young people's spatial practices. Among researchers working on topics related to student mobilities, it is well established that the very process of relocating to a different place forms an integral part of young people's learning and also often implies a movement along the social hierarchy (e.g. Findlay et al. 2012; Holdsworth 2009; Waters 2006, 2012). While existing literature on student mobilities has primarily centred on long-distance migration, the empirical findings presented in this chapter suggest that young people are able to maintain and nurture their social standing as an educated person through various forms of mobilities across different scales, including mundane movements, virtual travels, and even small bodily gestures. At the same time, my findings support the idea that spatial strategies for social ascent tend to be 'anti-local', in the sense that it is commonly thought to be necessary for young people to leave their homes in order to take advantage of presumably better educational opportunities available elsewhere (see also Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011).

CHAPTER FIVE

Confronting the present

Social hierarchies and the realities of young people's everyday life

> Muna: [N] Young people in Nepal – well, some are living in the villages and struggle, and we are also struggling here [in Kathmandu]. And I have other friends who have gone abroad and also struggle there. So looking at this situation, it seems that we are all in a confused state. And if you ask us about the future – well, the only thing that's sure in Nepal is load-shedding.[30]

I was introduced to Muna, a young Brahmin woman in her early twenties, by another research participant mid-way through my field research in Kathmandu in late December 2011. The three of us were sitting in an empty, damp teashop located close to the campus. Each of us was clutching a glass of hot tea to warm our hands. I was facing the back of the room, which was left almost in complete darkness. Power shortages had worsened significantly since the start of the dry cold season, with the result that there was no electricity during morning hours these days. Even though there was no light, I could make out a big poster on the wall: an advertisement in bright green and yellow colours for the soft drink Sprite. It showed a young man and a young woman smiling and leaning towards each other. Across the upper half of the poster it was written in capital letters: 'Chemistry at University of Freshology. Admission open.' It first seemed to be rather amusing that even a multinational beverage manufacturer headquartered in the US was apparently among the countless actors who sought to make a profit out of the educational revolution that has taken place in South Asia during the past three decades. However, the stark discrepancy between the flashy advertisement and the immediate surroundings in the teashop was sadly also a matching reflection of the point Muna was making at the same

[30] Load-shedding refers to the planned power cuts that the Nepal Electricity Authority imposes in order to cope with mismatched supply and demand, and that are published in the form of a weekly schedule in all daily newspapers. Because Nepal almost exclusively relies on hydropower, scheduled power cuts usually add up to more than 15 hours a day during the dry season from October through March. Political instabilities, historically rooted conflicts of interests between different stakeholders, and inefficient management continue to hinder attempts to find an appropriate solution for Nepal's electricity crisis (Shrestha 2010).

time. In the face of the realities of daily life in Kathmandu the hoped-for future often seemed to remain at a far distance for the young Nepalis I spoke with. The idea that the load-shedding schedule – the epitome of the country's incessant economic and political problems – seemed to be the only constant that made daily life in Kathmandu somewhat projectable, indicates just how difficult it was for young people to make sense of the contradictions and uncertainties of present-day life in Nepal.

The apparent disconnect between encouragements given to Nepal's educated youth to capitalise on their educational attainments and young people's chances of fulfilling such hopes and expectations is the subject of my investigations in this chapter. I show that in the case of Kathmandu's highly stratified society, young people frequently struggle to act upon their ideas of a prosperous future, even though they are capable of identifying promising educational and occupational trajectories. With this argument, I depart from Appadurai's (2004) rationale according to which the capacity to aspire allows social actors to become upwardly mobile. More than did Appadurai, it is necessary to attend to the structuring forces that serve as the matrix for social action (Johnson-Hanks 2002; see also Bourdieu 1977). I therefore examine to what extent aspirations tally with practicable avenues under the given social, economic, and political circumstances. In particular, I seek to identify obstacles to financial security and social respectability. In this context, I specifically focus on how social inequalities are reproduced in space. The empirical findings presented in this chapter complicate prevalent visions of youth as a source of hope. These insights also offer a basis to further reflect on the formation of young people's future orientations against the backdrop of situations where dominant future strategies seem to be largely incompatible with present-day realities.

Nepal's new *khetālā*

The overwhelming majority of students enrolled on the public campus were working in parallel with their studies. It was so common for young people in Kathmandu to combine their university studies with a full-time job that classes of graduate programmes were usually scheduled to fit around official office hours. A comparative analysis of the differences between the jobs held by the 40 research participants and the forms of work their parents were involved in suggests that Nepal's younger generation indeed benefitted from the emergence of new occupational fields in the urban labour market. Table 5.1 provides an overview of the fields of employment in which the young Nepalis I spoke with were engaged. Table 5.2 lists the occupations held by the parents of the research participants. As opposed to their parents, none of the 40 respondents was involved in the

Table 5.1 Occupations held by respondents

		Female	Male	Total
Tertiary Sector	Development Sector	6	5	11
	INGO	2	2	4
	NGO	4	3	7
	Private Business Sector	5	5	10
	Media	1	1	2
	Clerical work	3	1	4
	Retail business	1	1	2
	Health services		1	1
	Gastronomy		1	1
	Private Education Sector	6	8	14
	Schoolteacher	4	2	6
	Administration	2		2
	Private tutor		6	6
	Self-employed	1	1	2
	Not working	3		3
	Total	21	19	40

Table 5.2 Occupations held by parents

	Mother	Father
Primary Sector		9
Subsistence farming		4
Commercial farming		5
Secondary Sector	2	1
Construction industry		1
Garment industry	2	
Tertiary Sector	3	21
Schoolteacher	1	3
University lecturer		1
Shopkeeper		4
Hotel industry	2	1
Government		12
No Income	35	9
Housewife	34	
Unemployed		5
Divorced	1	
Deceased		4
Total	40	40

primary or secondary economic sector. Instead, all of those young people who held a job were engaged in tertiary activities. Another key difference between the two generations relates to women's participation in the labour market. Apart from three upper-caste young women, who identified themselves as 'not working', female research participants were actively involved in the modern labour market. By contrast, it was much less common for women of the parental generation to engage in paid labour: 34 research participants explained that their mothers were 'housewives'. It is safe to assume that even if the mother was said to be a housewife, her activities were not limited to household chores, especially if the family owned a small business or was involved in agricultural activities. However, for the classifications of occupational status, as shown in Table 5.1 and 5.2, I decided to rely on the terminology used by the respondents themselves.

Furthermore, several research participants mentioned that at times their families had been in a precarious financial situation. In particular, those four young men, whose families primarily relied on subsistence farming, recalled that it often had been a struggle for their parents to provide for the family. In a few other cases, the death of the father or the divorce of the parents had created economic difficulties for the family. Since women had attained little school education in earlier years, single mothers were often left to accept low-wage jobs in the manufacturing or hotel industry. The stories young Nepalis shared with me about their families' socio-economic background suggest that educational

attainments indeed constituted a kind of precondition to keep up with the structural changes in the country's economy.

Despite these obvious changes in employment opportunities, the young Nepalis I spoke with were, by and large, dissatisfied with their occupational situations. This was even the case for those few respondents, who earned an above-average income. For example, Niresh, a 35-year-old Limbu man, who was studying for the degree of Master of Arts in English, worked for different dental clinics in Kathmandu. The income he earned was approximately a quadruple of the average per capita income in Nepal in 2011. Despite being in a better financial situation than most of his peers, Niresh remarked during a follow-up interview I conducted with him in February 2012: E "We are all *khetālā* here. Even doctors are *khetālā* in Nepal." The term '*khetālā*' actually refers to day labourers and specifically to those working in the fields – a low-pay, low-prestige job which is considered to be entirely inappropriate for an educated person. But, as I discuss in this section, the term provides an apposite analogy for the occupational status held by many educated young Nepalis for exactly the same reasons.

The realities of 'dream jobs'

The emergence of a new propertied urban class in Kathmandu in the 1980s and 1990s can be linked to the growth and diversification of the tertiary economic sector (Liechty 2003). In particular, in the course of the expansion of the government sector, the development industry, and the finance sector new employment opportunities have become available at the professional level, which, however, also require more advanced educational qualifications (see Chapter 3). Most of the young Nepalis I spoke with aspired to secure a job at the professional level, ideally in accordance with the subject they were studying at university. On one occasion, in January 2012, I was walking with Sabita, a 25-year-old Chhetri woman, past a UN building in Kathmandu; its golden emblem and waving flags were widely visible. Once we got to the entrance gate of the UN complex, Sabita slowed down and sighed: E "Don't you want to come here one day and say 'This is my office'?!" Sabita articulated the hope shared by many of her peers, and especially by those enrolled in graduate programmes in the social sciences and humanities. Half of the 40 respondents explicitly stated that they aspired to engage in social service [*samāj sevā*] or to do some kind of development project. Ten research participants (six females/ four males) – all of them students of management studies or economics – also expressed the hope of carving out a career at the managerial level of a private bank. And a comparatively small number of four research participants (three females/ one male) declared that they were preparing for a career in the government service. Each of these four respondents belonged to one of

Nepal's ethnic communities classified as either 'disadvantaged' or 'marginalised' (see also Chapter 3).

It could be argued that these young Nepalis had good reasons for their ambitious career plans. In particular, national policymakers and international experts frequently promote the vision of educated youth as an ideal basis for 'demographic dividends', arguing that the new entrants into Nepal's labour force are generally better qualified and prepared to take up new forms of work associated with recent economic transformations (e.g. CBS 2008; Khare and Slany 2011). However, often in the same breath, national and international policymakers also raise concerns about the high level of underutilisation of educated youth. According to a labour market survey carried out in 2008, almost half of Nepal's young population, aged 20 to 29 years, was reported to be 'underutilised' (CBS 2008: 89 Table 8.0). Following the definitions and explanations provided in the report this means that even those who were economically active are unable to fully leverage their potential in the local labour market for three reasons: a partial lack of work, inadequate earnings, and a mismatch between the current occupation and previously acquired skills and qualifications (CBS 2008: 22).

A closer look at the employment histories of the young Nepalis I spoke with and their experiences with the modern labour market reveals that they were confronted with similar constraints. Uttam, the young Chhetri man whom I already introduced in Chapter 4, previously worked as an assistant accountant for a small local NGO for 32 months in parallel with his undergraduate studies for the degree of Bachelor of Business Studies. He quit this job when his final exams were approaching in order to concentrate on revising for the exams. After he successfully completed his bachelor's degree, he took up a full-time job as a marketing assistant for a private Internet service provider in Kathmandu. When he started his graduate studies ten months later, he again resigned. At the time of my fieldwork in 2011-2012, Uttam was working as a marketing consultant on a voluntary basis and simultaneously took a training course in Human Resource Management at a private education institute. When I met Uttam for our second interview in January 2012, I followed up on what he had told me about his career plans and his parents' advice to apply for the government sector.

> Uttam: E "I want my career in HR [Human Resources]. It may be in HR department of a bank or any NGO/ INGO or any manufacturing company. There is pressure. It is very hard to enter in HR department. They require lots of experiences."
>
> Andrea: E "And if you don't find a job in HR?"
>
> Uttam: E "I could also try for accountant. I also have experiences in accounting, my university degree also includes that. But I know that I have to make my career in HR."

Andrea: [E] "What's about your parents' idea of applying for a job in the government sector?"

Uttam: [E] "I am not studying management to then end up sitting the whole day in an office doing nothing. The only thing, I would have to do is this. [He stands up abruptly and takes a deep bow.] Every time an important person walks in. [laughs and adds in Nepali] *beijjat.* You know *beijjat*? It means the work is not honourable."

Uttam seemed to have no intention of following in the steps of his father, who had made a career as a civil servant. Like most of his peers, Uttam associated the public sector with obsolete structures and corrupt practices. Such narratives need to be understood within the context of the country's political situation and recent efforts to introduce a framework for affirmative action (see also Chapter 3). Several research participants, and especially upper-caste men, repeatedly criticised that the success of an application for a governmental post was less a matter of the candidate's qualifications than of the person's social networks and ethnic/ caste identity. While a government job still stood for a high degree of job security, it was no longer perceived to provide a good reputation [*ijjat*]. According to Uttam, the opposite was the case: dishonour [*beijjat*]. Such narratives imply that the reservation policies introduced in recent years may not diminish social inequalities associated with occupational identities. Instead, a new occupational hierarchy may emerge, with those working for the national government being ranked comparatively low when compared to those employed by the development industry or the private business sector (see also Sijapati Basnett 2012). Organisations, such as NGOs, donor agencies, media companies, and private banks, were perceived to offer a more dynamic work environment, which in turn held the promise for the younger generation to be able to make better use of their educational qualifications and youthful vigour. But the daily job realities in those recent emergent segments of the modern labour market often had little in common with the professional careers young Nepalis aimed for. By describing the job situations of two research participants in more detail, I illustrate the difficulties young people in Kathmandu often confront as they try to forge a career.

When I met Ranjan, a 25-year-old Brahmin man, for the first time in October 2011, he proudly presented me with his business card, indicating that he was a 'member of the executive broad' and the 'general secretary' of a local NGO. He further explained: [E]

We established this organisation to uplift rural people. Most of the Nepali people live in rural areas. And as students of rural development, we need to try to uplift them. This is our small effort. We hope that we will be able to uplift them after some years. We specifically focus on marginalised and ethnic groups, who live in the rural area.

A few weeks later, Ranjan agreed to meet me for a longer interview. This time, he came prepared with a big folder which included mission statements, project plans, and organisational diagrams. He enthusiastically explained in detail each of the initiatives

outlined in the pages. Over the next couple of months, I continued to see Ranjan and his friends from the master programme in rural development regularly around campus and we eventually agreed that I should visit him at his workplace before I leave Nepal. The office turned out to be a sparely furnished room on the ground floor of his uncle's house located in a middle-class residential area of the city. It was during this visit that Ranjan told me that none of the project ideas had so far been implemented. Moreover, rather than earning an income, he kept on investing not only time and effort but also his own money in the organisation in the hope of establishing himself as a development expert.

Because of cases such as Ranjan's, the booming NGO sector is increasingly an object of ridicule (see also Heaton Shrestha 2002: 8–9). In particular, it has been criticised that the main beneficiaries of the ongoing process of 'NGO-isation' are not so much the poor, but the founders of the NGOs themselves, not least because setting up an NGO is seen to be way to provide a younger family member with a respectable job as a development aid worker (Heaton Shrestha 2010b). From the perspective of young Nepalis, like Ranjan, their involvement in small-scale development projects, however, has very little to do with the benefits commonly associated with professional NGO work. The other six research participants who were also employed by local NGOs based in Kathmandu confirmed that their monthly salaries which ranged between Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 8,000 was insufficient to cover even basic living expenses, which easily added up to an amount between Rs. 7,000 and Rs. 20,000 per month.[31] They therefore either relied on other family members for financial support or held a side job to supplement their income. For these young people, the hope of a lucrative career as a development aid worker has become closely associated with financial burdens. Precisely because of these economic constraints, many of their peers had to depart from their initial ambitions of engaging in social service.

For Amita, a 24-year-old Chhetri woman, financial concerns became more pressing after she got married in 2010 and moved in with her husband and mother-in-law, particularly because monetary issues seemed to be the underlying reason for perpetual family disputes. When we first met in October 2011, Amita shared her anxieties with me, noting: [E]

> "Every time when I say 'I want to wear this' or 'I want to eat this', they [husband and mother-in-law] get so angry. 'She doesn't have a job, and still she keeps on demanding.' [...] That's why it is necessary for women today to have a job."

It was a great relief for Amita when, a few weeks later, she was hired as an office assistant by a small finance institute. In late December 2011, I visited Amita at her new

[31] These figures are based on respondents' own records. Costs of living were reported to be significantly higher if the parental home was located outside the city, and room rents further added to monthly living expenses.

workplace. Amita's office was a small, bleak room, which was divided by a long wooden counter and furnished with a shelf that contained two thin folders labelled 'loans' and 'deposits'. Apart from Amita, no one was around. Amita was happily chatting away, telling me how glad she was that she could now contribute to the household's income, even though she was only paid a meagre starting salary of Rs. 3,000 per month. But she was hopeful that the practical experiences she gained at the finance institute in combination with her academic qualifications in management studies would allow her to embark on a career in the banking sector in the future. Her husband, who was also completing his master's studies and was employed at a private college, was very supportive and agreed that she should continue her education alongside her full-time job. But when I saw Amita for the last time in February 2012, she considered quitting her job after only five months, for the following reason: [N]

> "I don't know what to do. I feel like leaving the job. I haven't been able to give any time to my studies. […] As a married woman, it is difficult to manage everything. That's how I feel. I leave home at 5 a.m. and only reach back after 7 p.m., and then I start cooking. My mother-in-law does not talk to me, because she thinks I am not doing enough. But I cook every day. Very rarely she helps me with the household. […] The situation is like this, even if I do the job, it is difficult, and if I don't do it, it is also difficult."

As Amita's case illustrates, young women were increasingly expected to participate in the public places associated with middle-class culture, including the university campus and the modern labour market (see also Donner 2005; Liechty 1996; Osella and Osella 2000b). To the extent that women's role was no longer restricted to the domestic space, it can be said that established gender roles were changing. The newly gained freedoms, however, also constituted additional liabilities, mainly because gender relations remained much the same with regard to the allocation of domestic duties. As a result, young women, like Amita, saw themselves increasingly confronted with competing priorities, as they had to juggle work, study, and family commitments simultaneously. In this context, female respondents, whether married or not, commonly expressed a profound sense of 'time famine' (Perlow 1996), as these young women felt that there was never enough time for them to handle all the duties others expected them to fulfil both within as well as outside the domestic sphere. Young women therefore seemed to be particularly likely to discontinue their employment on a frequent basis, or change jobs after short periods, especially during exam periods or for family reasons. Gendered responsibilities and related time constraints, then, emerge as important factors that hamper young women's attempts to build a successful career in the modern labour market under the given social circumstances of the patriarchal system.

The accounts of Uttam, Ranjan, and Amita suggest that the problem for young Nepalis was not so much the complete absence of economic opportunities than the daunting prospect of holding a poorly paid job. Such concerns resonate with wider policy discourses about the labour market in Nepal, which emphasise that the challenge of generating new jobs and converting unproductive jobs to productive ones is a matter of urgency. The number of new entrants to Nepal's labour force is estimated to increase from currently 320,000 to over 400,000 in 2018 (Khare and Slany 2011: 14). It is feared that many of these young people will find themselves in the 'moral trap' of mass education, as described by Robert Serpell (1993). In his study of universal primary education in Zambia, Serpell links this trap primarily to structural constraints. He argues that schools end up producing failures, because there are simply not enough productive jobs available to absorb the growing number of educated young people into the labour market. In the case of Nepal, young people may also feel trapped, because they have come to believe in moralities and ideals which are not compatible with the social barriers they confront on a daily basis. Persisting inequalities based on gender, caste/ ethnicity, and class were underlying reasons for the erratic employment histories of the research participants. Established notions of respectable femininity and masculinity in particular, significantly complicated young people's attempts to follow through on their career plans and to negotiate the structural constraints they confronted in the modern labour market.

Jobs done but not wanted

The commercialisation of formal education, which accelerated significantly during the 1990s and 2000s, has opened up numerous opportunities for part-time and full-time teaching positions. Apart from the most expensive schools, private education providers in Nepal commonly employ teachers who are untrained, in the sense that it is generally sufficient to have passed the SLC in order to teach at primary and secondary school level. In addition, more privileged families in Kathmandu frequently hire college students to provide private tutorials for their children after they return home from school in the afternoon or evening (see also Jeffrey 2010b). Thus, working as a schoolteacher or private tutor was perhaps the easiest way for educated young people in Kathmandu to earn an income and to combine their studies at university with a full-time job.

Out of the 40 young Nepalis I spoke with 14 (six females/ eight males) were employed in the private education sector. These young people had accumulated a remarkable amount of work experience, as they usually had started to teach right after completing secondary school and since then have often continuously been involved in the teaching profession. For example, Sadhika, aged 28 in 2012, had been employed by an

English medium school already for seven years as a teacher of English and sociology at lower secondary school level. To supplement her income, Sadhika also gave private tutorials in the evening three times a week. As a wife and mother of a three-year old, Sadhika's day usually started at 4 a.m. and did not end before 10 p.m. Nonetheless, her job as a schoolteacher allowed Sadhika to earn sufficient money and to manage her time in a way that she could continue her own education as well as care for her family. Other research participants who also worked as schoolteachers or private tutors shared similar experiences with me. All of them explained that they started to engage in teaching mainly because of immediate financial needs. Monthly salaries of full-time secondary schoolteachers in Kathmandu ranged between Rs. 8,000 and Rs. 15,000 per month, which added up to more than double the amount of the average per capita income in Nepal in 2011. These financial incentives notwithstanding, none of the young Nepalis I spoke with aspired to a career as a schoolteacher. Instead, they hoped to change their occupational field in the long term. Young people's reasoning for why they aimed for a career change was quite similar, as the following extracts from three separate interviews that I conducted during the winter vacations in January 2012 exemplify.

> Sadhika: [E] "I've been doing the same job continuously for seven years. But I also must think about my future. So I want to change, means teaching profession I want to change. I also already have an idea. I want to run an NGO with my friends. We are five people. All of us study rural development. So we want to do something in this field. [later in the conversation] The problem with private schools is that the school itself is respected. The teacher is not! The owners, they are very rich. They have their own cars. They have a good house. That's why the school is respected. But the teachers are not."

> Roshni: [N] "I am studying management, but work as a teacher [in a private secondary school]. That doesn't match. After studying management, I wanted to try for a job in the banking sector. But now my problem is that I don't have relevant experience. My experience is only in teaching. So I am afraid I won't fit [the job requirements]. [...] At first, when I started looking for a job, teaching was easily available. [...] Most people think that those who are doing a teaching job just do it to pass time."

> Saroj: [N] "I want to work as a scientist. But there are no research centres here [in Nepal]. So I am studying physics. But because there are no research centres or laboratories, we always have to take up the teaching profession. [...] Apart from that, there are no alternatives for us."

As indicated by Sadhika, Roshni, and Saroj, the job of a private schoolteacher or tutor had little to offer in terms of social recognition [*ijjat*]. Despite the fact that teaching represents one of the tenets of Hinduism, the social status attached to the profession of a schoolteacher is surprisingly low in the case of Nepali society. Already in 1971, university students strongly disapproved of the introduction of the NDS programme for the very same reason. The programme established that all graduate students were required to

spend several months teaching at rural schools in fulfilment of their degree requirements (see Chapter 3). From the perspective of the students, however, the programme was an unwarranted disruption of their educational and occupational careers (see also Messerschmidt et al. 2007). The NDS was discontinued in 1979, largely because the programme was deeply unpopular among the students studying at TU and hence threatened to fuel student protests against the ruling regime (e.g. Caddell 2007; Whelpton 2005). While the social valorisation of formal education coupled with the emergence of a market for professional employment has led to the rapid expansion of the private education sector, little has changed with regard to the low value and prestige attached to the teaching profession even in more recent years (cf. Carney 2003).

This challenge seemed to be of particular concern to students of the natural sciences, like Saroj. Nepali schoolchildren are taught from an early age that a degree in natural sciences is particularly prestigious, as it is generally perceived to be more difficult and also more expensive than courses in the fields of the humanities or social sciences. However, whether the course actually enhances students' employability and equips young people with the skills needed in the local labour market is apparently of secondary importance for young people's choice of subject. As a result, several respondents anxiously noted that the educational qualifications they had obtained did not facilitate their career development.

Taken together, these investigations into respondents' occupational status and career aspirations imply that young people's search for an adequate job resembles a complex calculation, as they have to account for financial necessities, possible implications for their social reputation, as well as any prospects for future career developments. In view of their own work experiences, young Nepalis were cautiously aware that even the modern labour market, which was mainly composed of the development industry, the finance sector, and private education providers, did not easily allow for a combination of all of these hoped-for benefits. Jobs which paid enough to cover basic costs of living often did not earn much social respect, and jobs which were generally well respected did not necessarily provide for a living. Based on these empirical findings, I challenge Appadurai's (2004) central proposition that the capacity to map out potential future pathways provides a key basis for social ascent. For the young Nepalis I spoke with, realising their professional aspirations was not solely a matter of identifying promising career trajectories and preparing for newly emerging employment fields, as the concept of the 'capacity to aspire' would imply. Rather, young people's attempts to enter the modern labour market were significantly complicated by a range of different factors, including large-scale economic problems, undetermined labour market regulations, gender roles and occupational hierarchies. However, parents' encouragements and wider public

discourses according to which educated youth were said to be particularly well poised to capitalise on their educational attainments and to seize new economic opportunities took little account of the practical avenues available for young people upon entering the modern labour market.

The burdens of education-related mobilities

My investigations into respondents' occupational realities show that these young people struggled to cash in on their educational qualifications. In this section, I want to explore in more depth which factors obstructed young people in their attempts to gain social recognition for their educational performance and to realise their hope for a more prosperous future life. More specifically, I examine how imagined geographies and dominant meanings attached to the places around which young people's lives were organised shaped young people's perceptions of self and their horizons of opportunity. With this analytical focus, I build on the conceptual work of Tim Cresswell (2006), who emphasises that mobilities scholars need to move beyond primarily observing how people practise different forms of spatial mobility. Rather, it is of equal importance to address questions about how ideas of mobility are conveyed through a diverse array of representational strategies (ibid.: 3-4). In this way, Cresswell argues, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of the ways in which spatial mobility may reproduce existing social inequalities or even generate new ones (see also Massey 1993). In my analysis, I am therefore particularly attentive to how the research participants were positioned in relation to education-related mobilities and what difference this made for their chances of realising their future aspirations.

The public campus as a contested space

The learning efforts of TU students were significantly hampered by several malfunctions of the public education system in Nepal, as I was able to personally witness on a daily basis on campus. Many classroom windows were broken, with the result that room temperatures dropped below ten degrees Celsius during the cold season. There was no system whatsoever to categories or sort the books in the campus library. There was also usually no fuel for the generator which was supposed to provide electricity to the computer and science laboratories during load-shedding hours. Exams which were to take place between March and July 2012 were delayed for almost seven months. In addition, students and lecturers alike seemed to have accepted that the campus primarily functioned based on a 'helmet faculty' – a phrase much used on campus to joke about how

lecturers had to rush on their motorbikes from one college to another, not even having enough time to take off their helmets during class. In order to make ends meet, academic staff had to work two or three additional shifts at private colleges, with the result that they often turned up late for class or not at all. In particular, after the mid-year vacation in January, I found the campus mostly vacant. Asked about students' lack of attendance, research participants explained to me that most of their fellow students felt that it was a waste of time to travel to campus only to find out that classes had again been cancelled. With the end-of-year examinations looming on the horizon, most of the students therefore spent their time and money on private tuition. According to TU records available for the academic year 2010/ 2011, most of its constituent campuses in Kathmandu conducted only half of the required 150 class sessions per year (Kathmandu Post 2011a). These participant observations and official figures indicate that students' chances of making a good progress with their studies were severely undermined by a number of irregularities in the academic schedule and the conduct of the university courses.

The state-financed education system in Nepal appeared to be in a particularly dilapidated state when compared to private schools and colleges (see also Kölbel 2013). This was also an issue that research participants frequently brought up in our conversations about their educational experiences and aspirations. The large majority of them (34 out of 40) had never attended a private institution throughout their young lives. Nonetheless, they all expressed clear ideas about how their own educational experiences on the public campus compared to those of private college students.

> Keshar: E "[At the private university] they strictly follow the schedule. But here examinations always get postponed. So, we are lagging behind. I think, they complete their degree six months earlier because of that."

> Karuna: N "Classes are never regular in government colleges. In the private colleges, classes will always be running, because they have a better administration. Here [on the public campus] due to strikes or because the teacher is absent, you never know whether classes will take place or not."

> Shreya: E "In the private institutions the classes are smaller. Like here [on the public campus] we are at least twice as many students in the classroom. [At the private colleges] there is always a projector, always laptops, sometimes AC or heating for the very cold days. But see here at the public college, everything is lacking, isn't it? Just compare our facilities!"

> Jeevan: N "If you go to a private school, you have the opportunity to study in English medium and to interact with people from quite well-off families. I've never been to any private education institution. I went to a government school and now I am again at a government campus. [...] That's why my English is poor."

As illustrated by these extracts from four different interviews that I conducted in November 2011 and January 2012, private education in Nepal was commonly seen to be

synonymous with a number of tangible benefits, such as modern facilities, advanced English language skills, better discipline, and fewer interruptions to the academic schedule. Such perceptions were further reinforced by the ways in which private and public education providers were represented by the local media. The moment one opened a daily newspaper, turned on the TV, or moved through the public spaces in the city, one was exposed to the advertisements of Kathmandu's private schools and colleges. Photos of modern buildings and well-equipped classrooms were often placed next to such promising names like 'Ambition College', 'Modern Nepal College', 'Galaxy Global College', and 'Golden Gate Academy' to name but a few. TU campuses, on the other hand, typically only made headlines when another student protest had occurred or exams had again been postponed. Repeatedly local newspapers published articles, according to which TU and its constituent campuses were facing a bleak future, due to an 'apathetic government', 'derelict gurus', and 'meddling student unions' (Kathmandu Post 2010). As a direct consequence of the deteriorating educational standards, TU campuses were said to be 'starved of students', because they were unable to compete with the growing number of private colleges for new enrolments (B. Ghimire 2010; Ghimire 2012).

The debate about the effectiveness of various forms of educational provision in Nepal has been live for some years, as adverse effects of the public-private competition in the education market already started to show at lower levels of the schooling system (e.g. Caddell 2006; Thapa 2012). In an attempt to provide clarification in relation to complex issues, such as educational quality and student performance, most commentators tend to focus on input and output indicators, such as classroom facilities, students' command of English, and exam-pass rates. On such counts most of the public colleges indeed perform poorly (e.g. Thapa 2012, 2013). Chronic underfunding and political dissent have certainly taken a toll on state-provided education in Nepal. Private institutions, on the other hand, were in a better position to fulfil these specific criteria, especially since comparatively high tuition fees provided them with a steady source of income. For example, in 2011, tuition fees for a two-year master programme in management studies amounted to Rs. 365,000 at the private university in Kathmandu, as opposed to Rs. 15,000 on the public campus where I conducted this research. Based on educational indicators and easily quantifiable targets used by policymakers the most expensive colleges in Kathmandu are generally seen to be the best performing institutions (see also Caddell 2006).

Despite obvious deficits in the public education sector, it is important to note that the division between public and private, poor and good quality, low-cost and high-cost education is much less clear-cut than prevailing opinion suggests. The private education sector has expanded in a rather uncontrolled manner, following the opening of the education sector to private investments in the 1990s (Sijapati 2005; see also Chapter 3).

Little attention was being paid to where additional colleges were to be established and how education was to be provided by different stakeholders. Most of the new colleges and educational programmes were set up within the capital city, mainly because private providers sought to target the comparatively resource-rich urban population (Bhatta et al. 2008; Sijapati 2005). As a result, there exists now a huge variety of private education providers in Kathmandu. At the lower end of this range institutions are not necessarily better equipped than government colleges. In addition, most private colleges only offer a narrow range of educational programmes. According to a complete list of affiliated colleges published by TU in 2011, only 44 out of 246 institutions located within the urban Kathmandu Valley offered courses in the natural sciences, engineering, medicine or law, and only 47 ran programmes at master's level.[32] These figures illustrate that most private education providers seem to stop short of starting more capital-intensive courses in the natural, technical, or medical sciences, for which substantial investments in laboratories and specialised equipment is necessary. The training of much needed technical personnel, as well as the development of future research staff, therefore remains to a large extent the responsibility of state-financed education institutions, and above all TU.

Furthermore, it remains questionable which one of the two forms of educational provision is more efficient in providing the young generation with the skills and expertise necessary to negotiate and address present social, political and economic challenges. Mark Liechty's (2003) work implies that the young urban middle class, despite obtaining private schooling, struggled to secure adequate employment. In a similar vein, some of the young Nepalis I spoke with were expressed similar concerns with regard to the public-private competition in the education sector. Out of the 40 research participants, six had previously attended private institutions before continuing their education on the public campus. Three of them had been sponsored by merit-based and need-based scholarship schemes, and otherwise would not have been able to afford a private education. The other three came from comparatively wealthy families but still opted for the supposedly low-quality public campus at which to continue their studies. Being able to directly draw from their own personal insights, these young people held a more nuanced view on the pros and cons of private education, as exemplified by the following extracts from different interviews that I conducted in November 2011 and February 2012.

> Arjun: [E] "I wanted to be a part of the campus life at a public institution as well. Even if I go abroad and study for a master's [degree] abroad, then I would feel like: 'Yes, this is the case and this is the scenario.' And only then I can think about contributing some of my experience to improve education, because it is also necessary for development. That was my reason for coming here."

[32] The document was published on the university's web page during the academic year 2011/ 2012. Available online: http://www.tribhuvan-university.edu.np/ [Last accessed September 3, 2011]

Arpita: [E] "Because the campus here is not well managed, we rely on self-study. But if you are willing to study hard, you can gain a wide knowledge. At the private college, we only focused on the class content and didn't go beyond that."

Muna: [N] "In the private school, the system was good. But I don't think the students really appreciated that. They were so used to get everything from their parents. But here, on the public campus, there are many who come from outside the valley. They understand how hard it is to even get here. So, they are more serious about their studies."

Narendra: [E] "The difference is like between a high-tech pressure cooker and a local cooker. When I was at [the private college] everything was quick and ready but kind of given in capsules. But over here, there is the real struggle! [...] What is the real Nepal and how difficult it is for the youth, I only learned in this place."

Researchers, who have followed the structural developments within Nepal's formal education system, have argued that public and private education must not be placed in direct opposition. Rather, different educational institutions need to be assessed along a continuum, running from lower to higher educational quality (e.g. Caddell 2006; Carney 2003; Madsen and Carney 2011). In the public debate, however, a more nuanced assessment of the benefits and disadvantages of governmental and private educational provision does not commonly surface, not least because this would be against the interests of some influential stakeholders. As Martha Caddell (2006: 476) points out, "private sector institutions have much to gain by maintaining a sense of competition between the government and private schools: perceptions of government failure fuel private school enrolment."

The intensification of the competition between public and private education providers has further consolidated the role of education as a marker of social distinction. In the belief that private colleges offered quality education above the standard of the state-financed institutions, many parents in Kathmandu strove to send their children to the 'best' school, which often meant the one they could only just afford (e.g. Carney 2003; Liechty 2003; Valentin 2005). Even government officials and university lecturers abandoned the state system and chose to send their own children to private institutions. This widespread practice of the urban middle-class further fostered the idea that the cost of study rather than students' individual performance served as an indication of the value and prestige attached to the educational credentials attained. The young Nepalis I spoke with were consequently greatly concerned that the educational credentials they obtained on the public campus would turn out to be worthless in the eyes of wider society.

Sadhika: [E] "They sell their land to provide for their children's education. And after that if the child doesn't get a good job, what will they do? Their land is gone! Education also won't work! They will have to face many problems."

> Anandi: [N] "I feel that I have not been studying for the sake of study. [sighs] I have seen many, who are demoralised. Parents have spent so much [money] for them. But I feel that this is just what's happening. One has to study, because parents give [money]. So, one has to go to college. What to say now? Difficult question."

> Sumita: [N] "The education here is of no value. Nothing. You have seen it yourself. [On the public campus] people come and go. Does anybody care? Study or not, nobody really cares. Even if we pass PhD from here, what is the value? Nothing, right?! Even those who hold a bachelor's degree have to engage in waged labour. We will complete our certificates. But what difference does it make, if people think that they are not good enough. That is my opinion. It is not that anybody has told me about it. My parents are not educated. My elder brother is also not educated. It is me who is the most educated. How are they supposed to know about the value of education?! It is only me who knows."

As these quotations suggest, many students from the public campus expressed a sense of misgiving at their economic prospects. The views and feelings shared by these young people accord with Smith's (2013) notion of a 'generational vertigo'. Smith defines this sensibility as "a mixture of apprehension and anticipation about a future understood to be precarious and unknowable, except through dizzying glimpses observed or experienced in the lives of the young" (ibid.: 573). Similar to the young Ladakhis in Smith's study, the large majority of research participants did not want to disappoint their parents who seemed to rest their hope for a better future on the younger generation and spared no expenses for their children's education. On the other hand, these young Nepalis were worried that education did not 'work' in the way that it would allow them to secure a salaried job and to improve their families' financial situation. While their parents remained largely removed from the daily realities of student life in Kathmandu, the young generation of public university students understood very well that it was increasingly hard for them to gain social recognition for their educational qualifications. In this context, several research participants anxiously noted that in Kathmandu's heterogeneous educational landscape, social distinction was no longer only a matter of being educated. Rather, it was increasingly a question of whether one attended a private or a public institution. These young people understood that the contrasting juxtaposition of public and private education was not only a marketing tool of private providers but was also manifested in the social consciousness.

In this context, it is important to emphasise that a tight focus on young people's individual performance generally risks downplaying the extent to which specific socio-spatial settings are of crucial importance for the ways in which young people can exercise their agency. In the case of Kathmandu's urban society, the perceived value of young people's educational qualifications was judged less based on students' individual performance than based on the reputation of the specific educational institution. Consequently, young people's capacity to build a prosperous future life was only partially

a matter of doing well in school and at university. More importantly, young people's chances of capitalising on their educational attainments were shaped by the ways in which the educational institution they attended was represented in the public debate and which social and political meanings, consequently, became attached to the campus as a social space (cf. Cresswell 2006). For this reason, many of the students I spoke with on the public campus in Kathmandu were concerned that they were in a weak position to compete with their apparently better trained and generally richer peers, and hence feared that they would not be able to satisfy their parents' expectations as well as their own hopes for the future.

Coming from inside and from outside the Kathmandu Valley

Nepal is a highly diverse country both in terms of its ecology as well as its cultural heritage (see Chapter 2). According to the young Nepalis I spoke with, however, the classification, which seemed to be of any relevance, was whether they came from inside or from outside the Kathmandu Valley. Respondents who have been long-term residents of Kathmandu commonly associated places located outside the valley – perhaps apart from other urban centres, such as Pokhara and Biratnagar – with notions of poverty and hardship. My conversation with Sumita is a case in point. Sumita grew up in Kathmandu as the oldest daughter of a comparatively poor Brahmin family. Her parents only sporadically held a waged job, with the result that the family of five primarily relied on the income that Sumita and her older brother were earning. Because of these financial difficulties, it had often been hard for Sumita to continue her studies: all the more reason for Sumita to feel proud of her educational attainments. Her older brother discontinued his formal education in grade eleven and her two brothers dropped out in grade ten. Nonetheless, when we spoke about her classmates who were not originally from Kathmandu, Sumita still felt that she was in a relatively privileged position.

> Andrea: N "How much do you have to pay for your master programme?"
>
> Sumita: N "Rs. 9,000 per year, so Rs. 18,000 in total. Plus admission and examination fees. But we do not have to pay everything at the beginning of the year. So I still have time to save some money."
>
> Andrea: N "Is it difficult for you to finance your studies?"
>
> Sumita: N "At the moment, I think, I will be ok. For some of my classmates it is more difficult. Those who come from the villages, they face so many financial problems. It's hard for them to study here. They study in misery, those who have come from outside the valley. There is no development in the villages. So, people from outside [the valley] have shifted here. They come here in the hope of getting a good education. But to study without working is difficult. The three of us [referring to her

siblings] have to earn enough to pay for food, rent, and education. Doing both [study and work] is difficult."

Sumita had never travelled beyond the valley rim. In fact, only three young men out of the 18 research participants (12 females/ six males) who grew up in the capital city had been to a semi-urban or rural place in Nepal. In this context, some of the urban migrants I met in Kathmandu critically noted that the majority of young people from Kathmandu seemed to be largely ignorant of what was happening outside the capital city. When reading through the questionnaires that I had collected on campus in October 2011, the following note caught my attention: 'Sirwani/ Beltar VDC/ Udayapur District – Kathmandu people don't know Sirwani. They think it is a very remote place, but I don't think it is. Recently, there has been a lot of development. I like to tell you more about my place.' I decided to follow-up on this remark and arranged to meet with Chapala, the survey respondent who had written these words in response to the question about her place of origin. Chapala was a very lively and cheerful young Sherpa woman in her mid-twenties. Together with her older brother, she moved to Kathmandu in 2008. Chapala was proud to be the first in her extended family to study for a master's degree. Her older brother discontinued his studies at +2 level and her three younger siblings were only about to start their undergraduate studies. Chapala's younger siblings had also moved to Kathmandu one after another, while her parents were still living in Sirwani. In the interview, Chapala told Sujata and me more about her experience of moving to Kathmandu and of settling into the urban society.

Sujata: N "Have you been to Kathmandu before you moved here in 2064 [2008], or was it your first time?"

Chapala: N "It was my very first time. But I had already thought about it in the village. Kathmandu, everybody has that destination. Like, the main and final destination is Kathmandu. So before, I thought 'Kathmandu must be very beautiful' [sounding amazed], since everybody wants to come there. But whatever – half matches and the other half doesn't."

Andrea: E "What are the things that have matched your expectations?"

Chapala: N "The buildings in the cities. I always thought in the city the buildings must be very huge. And there are more facilities in terms of transportation and communication. At home, nobody knows about laptops. But here, everybody is on the net. In this way, I think, Kathmandu people are more developed."

Andrea: E "And what about the other half? What are the things that have not matched your expectations?"

Chapala: N "People come with many dreams to Kathmandu. Like, I used to think that everything is available in Kathmandu; that all opportunities are available here. But the kind of people who get opportunities are the ones who already have contacts. I

> think linkage is the main thing. But Kathmandu was an unknown place for me. So it was difficult. And also, society's image of you is different here. At home, I was a known person. I came first in the SLC. I scored very high and was among the best at district level. So, people at home respect me a lot. When I came here, I was new and no one knew me. And that time, I felt, 'Oh, where am I lost?!' It was such a pity condition, I think."

As emphasised by Chapala, passing the SLC was seen to be a great achievement for children who attended government schools and, even more so if the school was located outside the Kathmandu Valley (see Chapter 3). Over the past two decades, the tenth grade examination has come to represent an important milestone in the lives of young Nepalis, which, if passed, is thought to open up new horizons of opportunity. On the other hand, those young people who fail to make it through the 'iron gate' are seen to be deprived of the possibility to build a better life in the future (see also Kathmandu Post 2012). All of the young urban migrants I spoke with completed the SLC before moving to capital city. This achievement in and of itself indicated that these young people were part of the educated elite in their home communities. In addition, the large majority of research participants indicated that the financial situation of their families was relatively secure. In most cases, a parent – usually the father – earned a regular income as a lower level government officer or schoolteacher. Chapala's father, for example, worked as a kind of mediator, who helped other people to fill in forms, to write official letters, and to deal with the local authorities, in general. Five other respondents – all of them of Brahmin origin – also mentioned that their families owned sufficient land to involve in commercial farming. Only four out of the 22 young migrants told me that their families were involved in subsistence farming. These four young men had then also come to Kathmandu primarily in search of a paid job. Overall, however, it can be concluded that most of the young Nepalis who participate in education-related migration to the capital city are likely to come from families who are in a more privileged position than the majority of Nepal's rural population.

In Kathmandu, however, young urban migrants often saw themselves confronted with the challenge of being perceived to belong to lower-status groups. In part, this was because there were indeed a number of unexpected challenges that young urban migrants commonly faced upon arriving in the capital city. Double-digit inflation rates in the past few years had driven up prices for accommodation, transportation, and food items in the capital city, with the result that the differential between the costs of living inside and outside the Kathmandu Valley had increased significantly. Especially for those young people, who were the first in their extended families to move to the capital city, it was initially hard to gain an accurate idea of the cost implications before migrating to Kathmandu. For example, Himmat, a 21-year-old Tamang man, initially anticipated that he could survive in the capital city on Rs. 2,500 per month, unaware that he would end up spending Rs. 2,000 per month just to pay for his accommodation. Likewise, Deepa, a 25-

year-old Brahmin woman, recalled that she had a meagre budget of Rs. 1,500 at her disposal when she had first moved to Kathmandu four years previously. Both Himmat and Deepa acknowledged that they had underestimated the extent to which higher costs of living would deplete their financial resources, before coming to Kathmandu.

But the obstacles that young urban migrants commonly face in Kathmandu cannot be exclusively ascribed to their economic capacity. Rather, young people's attempts to gain social recognition and to become more established within the urban society are also hampered by stereotypical ideas associated with the rural-urban binary (cf. Vanderbeck and Dunkley 2003). In the case of Nepal, 'the rural' has historically been bound up with notions of backwardness and a lack of facilities, whereas 'the urban' is typically deemed to be more developed and sophisticated (Pigg 1992; see also Chapter 3). This point becomes apparent when comparing the accounts of Chapala and Sumita. In real terms, Chapala's family did not seem to be financially worse off than Sumita's family. In contrast to Sumita, however, Chapala was likely to be regarded as somebody who came from a less privileged background, merely because she grew up in a village outside the Kathmandu Valley. The way in which Sumita explained the difference between herself and her classmates from 'outside' the Kathmandu Valley suggests that she was largely unaware of the relatively high status that her migrant peers were likely to enjoy back home. Unable to draw from any personal experiences, most young people in Kathmandu associated young people's lives outside the valley with dominant images of the village as an underdeveloped and burdensome place (see also Valentin 2005). Likewise, young people from other parts of Nepal still perceived of the capital city as the acme of economic development and opportunities. While Sumita and Chapala tried to contest such oversimplified images of the city and the village, respectively, it became apparent that dominant meanings attached to 'the rural' and 'the urban' significantly shaped young people's perceptions of self and others and, in extension to this, their horizons of opportunity.

Barriers to international mobility

Faced with daunting economic prospects and persisting political uncertainties, many young Nepalis conceive of foreign migration as possibly the only way for them to realise their aspirations for social respectability and financial security. Research participants frequently expressed their dissatisfaction with the education system and the job market in Nepal and in the same breath they discussed the benefits of studying and living in a Western country. It became apparent that most of these young Nepalis aspired to study abroad not only because they sought to benefit from educational opportunities provided by other countries. Rather, an international education promised to provide a whole

package of improved opportunities for a better life in the future. Research participants often reasoned that, in Western countries, young people were able to secure a job that matched their educational qualifications and paid a good salary. In addition, life abroad was expected to be easier on the whole, because of better infrastructure and political stability. The aspiration to study abroad, therefore, closely linked to the hope for improved livelihoods and to the wish to escape from some of the difficulties young people had to cope with on a daily basis in Kathmandu (see also Valentin 2012a, 2012b). This line of argument emerged from various conversations I had with young Nepalis of both genders and from different socio-spatial backgrounds.

> Ameena: [N] "Abroad there are no restrictions for study or work. But here, even for the young people who are educated and want to do something, it is simply not possible due to the situation of the country. Our government also does not care about the youth. So, of course, we just want to go abroad and utilise our talent there."

> Nischal: [N] The problem with Nepal is that we cannot use our education here. We train computer engineers when we need agriculturists. So even if you are educated and work your entire life, you still won't have enough money when you retire. That's why we rely on the opportunities offered by other countries.

These two extracts are taken from separate conversations that I had with Ameena and Nischal when we first met in October 2011. Ameena, aged 25, grew up in a Newar family in the city. She had been in a relationship with her boyfriend for some time, but had no plans to marry in the near future. The largest part of the day, she spent for her studies and her domestic duties. Nischal, aged 27, was Brahmin and had moved with his family to Kathmandu from a small town in Bara district after his father had passed away in 2005. He was single and lived together with his mother and his two younger siblings. He was working full-time for a retail business earning approximately Rs. 10,000 per month. Nischal's earnings were his family's main source of income. I met Ameena and Nischal again in late November and in early December 2011, respectively. When our conversations turned again to their intention to study abroad, Ameena and Nischal explained in more detail how moving abroad would personally benefit them.

> Ameena: [N] "There are so many opportunities for both male and female. Women are treated differently [abroad]. Not like here, where there is no freedom for women. In other countries, women even enjoy going out at night. But here the families don't give permission and the security is also not good. [...] That's why it is better to just go abroad now and get some new ideas before returning back to the country. Maybe then in the future other generations do not have to go abroad. That's what I think."

> Nischal: [N] "I just want to study abroad for one simple reason: Money! No matter how hard I work, if I stay in Nepal, I will never be able to provide for my family. But my family is my first responsibility and in order to fulfil that I need to earn enough. Here, I probably will never earn more than Rs. 20,000 per month. But outside, you get paid in dollars, so it will easily be one lakh [Rs. 100,000]."

Their explanations revealed that by moving abroad young people tried to cope not only with the overall economic and political difficulties of their home country, but also with constraints and obligations linked to their gendered identities. Ameena hoped that she would have to face fewer restrictions as a young woman while living abroad, and would gain recognition as a liberated, modern woman also after returning back to Nepal with a foreign degree. Nischal, on the other hand, believed that going abroad was the only way in which he could fulfil the responsibilities ascribed to his role as the oldest son and main breadwinner of his family. Despite being able to specify which opportunities they associated with life abroad, neither Ameena nor Nischal had so far taken concrete steps towards the realisation of their ambitious plans. At the time of the follow-up interviews, Ameena and Nischal only knew that they wanted to go abroad on a student visa, but had neither decided on a destination nor commenced any application procedures for universities or the student visa. They seemed to have merely narrowed down on Anglophone countries as a preferred destination, arguing that their foreign language skills were limited to a basic knowledge of English. When I asked them which challenges they anticipated with respect to international migration, Ameena and Nischal frivolously dismissed any such concerns, emphasising that they were not going abroad as labour migrants.

In recent years, foreign migration has been a very dominant subject of debate in public life in Nepal. The local newspapers regularly publish articles which warn against the fraudulent practices of manpower agencies and against exploitative work conditions in foreign countries (e.g. Adhikari 2011; Bhatta 2014; Deshar 2011; Pun 2014; Sedhai 2014). Such warnings have gained a new urgency, as the number of fatal casualties among Nepali migrant workers has increased year after year: 643 in 2012, 828 in 2013, and more than 1,000 in 2014 (e.g. Acharya 2014; eKantipur 2013; Shrestha 2014). These figures exclusively refer to Nepalis who died while staying in one of the Gulf countries, Malaysia or India, with the latter being both a destination as well as a transit country for migrant workers from Nepal. By contrast, North American and European countries as well as Australia were hardly ever mentioned in the context of labour migration and instead were seen to represent desirable destinations for student migrants (e.g. Bhandari 2011; Gurung 2010; Ojha 2013; see also Chapter 4). The public discussion about international migration from Nepal gives the impression that it is possible to clearly distinguish between different forms of international mobility based on the purpose – i.e. labour versus education – and the destination of migration. The same dichotomous imaginaries had also become manifested in the minds of the young Nepalis I spoke with.

> Ramesh: [N] "Those who are not educated, they go for jobs, as labourers, to the Gulf countries. Those who have higher levels of education, they go to study in European or American countries."

Keshar: [E] "Like low and medium people go for Gulf countries. And high status people go for Australia, America, US."

As these two research participants explicitly stated, student migration to Western countries was seen to be a very desirable prospect, as it was clearly associated with the practices of more privileged social classes in Kathmandu (see Chapter 4). Going abroad on a student visa promised to provide for a more comfortable lifestyle while abroad as well as upon return to Nepal, in the sense that returnees were seen to be able to claim a space in Kathmandu's upper middle class. In spite of the fact that labour migrants could potentially earn more money while abroad, back in Kathmandu they were still stigmatised as poor and uneducated. None of the 40 research participants, therefore, considered migrating to countries in the Middle East or Southeast Asia, as these destinations were associated with the '3D – dirty, dangerous, and difficult', as one respondent put it.

At the same time, it was challenging for the young Nepalis I spoke with to distance themselves from labour migrants and to nurture their status as an educated person, because they essentially lacked reliable entry points to student migration. None of the 40 research participants had ever crossed the national border to India, let alone any other foreign country, and only a small minority of six female research participants came from families that had experiences with foreign migration. Apart from two cases where the older brother had moved on a dependent visa to the US, the family member – all of them young men – had migrated for work purposes mainly to the Middle East. While these family ties constituted the most direct link between research participants and diasporic Nepali, the experiences shared by their relatives were of little use for these young people to gain access to relevant social networks and information about studying abroad. Thus, research participants were, by and large, left with the private education consultancies, which at least promised to be a first step away from labour migration and towards the desired international education.

This was also the case for Nischal. When we met for the last time in early March 2012, Nischal told me that he had decided to go to Australia. An education consultant had told him that it was possible to work there more or less full-time in parallel with one's studies and that the Australian authorities easily granted permanent residency upon completion of the education programme. Nishal furthermore reported that the Australian government had just significantly lowered the financial requirements for processing student visas. Consequently, he was hopeful he could meet the financial conditions, not least because his maternal uncle had agreed to loan him a substantial amount of money. All he had to do now was to fulfil the language requirements. For this purpose, he had taken two test preparation courses within the past three months, each costing him Rs. 3,000, and was at present following a third one offered by a different education

consultancy. As a result, he seemed to know everything about the separate sections of the IELTS language test, specifically the time limits and the scoring system, but he added in Nepali: "I still can't say more than ABCD in English". The language test had become the biggest obstacle for Nischal to apply for a student visa. As an alternative route to Australia, he therefore considered to go on a dependent visa. Apparently, the education consultant had advised him to get married to a girl in his course, provided he would pay for her tuition fees in Australia.

After following Nischal's attempts to realise the dream of studying abroad over a period of six months, I was certain that he, like many other respondents, was primarily concerned with the admission and visa processes, but had little knowledge of the practicalities and potential challenges that awaited him upon reaching the desired country of destination. Leaving Nepal for a Western country seemed to become an end in itself. Considering that student visas are increasingly perceived to serve as an initial access point for more extended stays, if not even permanent residency, major receiving countries feel impelled to adopt stricter immigration policies for international students (see also Baas 2007; Valentin 2012a). However, under the omnipresent influence of education consultancies and the idealised imagined geographies they produce, young people, like Nischal, are unlikely to give up their intention to migrate abroad on a student visa. Instead, they seem to be willing to accept the risk of being driven to the edge of legality, in order to not lose out on the race for economic prosperity and social respect which seems to be decided at the international level (cf. Waters 2006).

As opposed to Nischal, Ameena did not seem to come closer to defining her plans for continuing her education at a foreign university after completing her master's degree. Over a period of six months, during which we met frequently, Ameena repeatedly expressed interest in attending one of the international education fairs in Kathmandu. We were planning to go together, but each time she had to cancel because she was unable to free up some extra time due to her workload at home. In addition, she explained that her parents had advised her to focus on her studies and not to get distracted with other ideas. Ameena also seemed to feel discouraged by her boyfriend. She told me: [N] "He doesn't like the idea. He says that the girls who go to America are only good for those who are already in America. But guys here are not interested in girls who go abroad." Listening to Ameena, it became evident that the aspiration to study abroad is both fed as well as obstructed by existing gender norms. On the one hand, young Nepali women feel inspired by the idea that in 'Western' societies, women's lives appear to be less restricted, and that they will gain recognition as a liberated, modern woman after returning to Nepal with a foreign degree. In practice, however, many of them struggle to take concrete steps towards the fulfilment of their ambition – not only because of limited financial and social resources,

but also because of established gender roles. The very same gendered restrictions that Ameena wanted to overcome in the first place by migrating abroad were likely to prevent her from realising her aspiration.

In sum, it can be concluded that participating in foreign migration was likely to remain a mere dream for the majority of research participants, as neither student nor labour migration were feasible options for them. On the one hand, it is perceived to be below the status of an educated person to join the outflow of migrant workers to Asian or Middle Eastern countries. Moving to another destination for work purposes has also become increasingly impossible, as countries in Europe and North America have adopted stricter immigration policies and significantly limited work permissions (see also Valentin 2012a; Waters and Brooks 2011). On the other hand, educated youth from less privileged social groups are also unlikely to go abroad on a student visa, as they generally lack the economic, social, and cultural capital available to those of their peers who belong to upper status groups. Aware of these challenges, one respondent noted with a sense of disillusionment: [N] "People who are well qualified go abroad and so do the non-qualified ones. Only lower middle-class people, like us, stay here in Nepal." With their richer peers going abroad as student migrants and their poorer peers going abroad as labour migrants, the young people I spoke with in Kathmandu were anxious about being left behind, removed from 'where things were happening' (cf. Jeffrey 2010b: 188). Their reliance on second-hand descriptions of life abroad only further reinforced highly desirable but also highly diffuse imaginaries of the foreign.

Conclusion: The unresolved status of educated youth

Based on an analysis of young people's occupational situations, I have shown that there is a significant discrepancy between prevalent discourses of hope and opportunity and the practical avenues available to young people. For the young Nepalis I spoke with, it was disconcerting that social expectations for educated youth seemed to take little account of the realities of present-day life in Kathmandu. In this respect, I have argued that Appadurai's (2004) conceptualisation of the capacity to aspire as a basis for social ascent needs to be revised, as it risks downplaying important counterforces. Instead, I have sought to think through young people's narratives about their potential futures in terms of both aspiration as well as apprehension (see also Smith 2013). By paying equal attention to the possibilities and the constraints that young people anticipate for the future, I was able to identify a number of influences that may delimit young people's horizons of opportunity and obstruct their attempts to realise the hope for a more prosperous future.

One reason for young people to feel anxious with regard to the future is Nepal's lingering economic and political crisis. Related problems, ranging from electricity and petrol shortages to the power games of national leaders, filtered through into the everyday life of young Nepalis. In addition to these quotidian uncertainties, however, social inequalities that run along gender, class, ethnic/ caste and geographical lines further complicate young people's efforts to gain social recognition for their educational performance and to embark on a lucrative career. In this context, I have shown that dominant meanings attached to certain places or spatial movements are often directly projected onto young people's identities. On the one hand, such prevalent associations allowed young people to distinguish themselves from the parental generation or less educated peers (see also Chapter 4). On the other hand, more privileged social groups likewise made use of imagined geographies associated with private colleges, the city, or Western Anglophone countries in order to set themselves apart from the growing number of educated youth from less privileged backgrounds whose emergence started to represent a potential threat to the established social hierarchy (cf. Massey 1993). The young Nepalis I spoke with were indeed unable to follow the educational routes taken by their more affluent peers, mainly because they could not draw from the same economic, social, and cultural resources. As a result, these young people were left with a sense of unresolvedness: hopeful to move above their social origins and, at the same time, anxious to continue lagging behind upper-status groups.

CHAPTER SIX

Ways of moving ahead

Dominant representations and modest appropriations

> Rohan: [E] It often seems like nothing is ever going to change in Nepal. But I think the problem is that we expect change to come fast. And then if change does not happen as expected, we think that nothing is moving ahead. But maybe we just expect too much. [pause] If you think about it, many young people are already doing so many things, just maybe in different ways than expected.

On an early afternoon in April 2012, I sat together with Rohan during his lunch break in a small eatery close to his office, as we had many times before over the course of the past six months. Rohan, aged 24 in 2011, grew up as the only son in a lower middle-class Chhetri family in Kathmandu and like many of his peers he sought to combine his university studies with a full-time job in the hope of building a more comfortable future life for himself and his family. Our previous discussions had often revolved around the many problems that the country's political and economic deadlock caused, and which obstructed the younger generation in their attempts to realise the hope for a better future. Towards the end of my field research in Kathmandu, I could not help but feel overwhelmed by the sheer number of stories that I had heard in the past months about young people's aspirations and their seeming inability to realise them. But Rohan's incidental comment encouraged me to reconsider the way in which I was looking at the material: rather than solely asking whether or not these young people were able to realise dominant future strategies and to bring about the hoped-for progress, it was important to attend to articulations of hope and agency which may be less expected based on public discourses about the role of educated youth in Nepali society.

Read together, the first two empirical chapters, 4 and 5, present an interesting conundrum. Nepali youth generally feel encouraged to aspire to higher education, white-collar employment, urban life, and foreign migration, when at the same time they realise that the desired outcomes associated with these future pathways are likely to remain out of reach for most of them. A stark contrast between aspirations for the future and economic opportunity is common among young people throughout much of the world, but

it is particularly acute among young people living in countries in the global South. In places as diverse as Uganda (Meinert 2009), Ethiopia (Mains 2012), and India (Jeffrey 2010b; Nisbett 2007), young people are found to be left with a profound sense of disappointment and feelings of failure, because the desired future is unachievable for most of them. In this context, research suggests that widespread political agendas of children's rights and well-being may, in fact, be part of the problem. In a study of projects of schooling and health education in Eastern Uganda, Lotte Meinert (2009) found that these policies often take for granted that young people can be 'agents of change', but fail to look at the specific context of resources, moralities, and competences. Similar, Peter Kraftl (2008) shows that such broad-brush representations of childhood and hope tend to ignore more modest forms of hoping, as articulated by the British youth featuring in his study.

Building on these contributions, I seek to further unpack the paradoxical nature of young people's aspirations which is at the core of the debate about the apparent 'crisis' of youth. In this chapter, I discuss how Nepal's educated youth were represented in the popular rhetoric, but I also investigate how young Nepalis themselves related to these dominant representations of youth. I argue that public debates about educated young people primarily reproduced pervasive depictions of youth as either the makers or the breakers of future society, precisely because they remained focused on highly visible forms of youth activism. While most of the young Nepalis I spoke with did not completely reject such universalising representations of educated youth, they also did not identify themselves with these dominant depictions. By contrasting dominant discourses on youth agency with young people's own reflections on their capacity to move towards a desirable future, this final part of my empirical analysis underlines the various ways in which young people may appropriate pervasive future strategies. I argue that such modest appropriations were of great significance for young people's efforts to negotiate multiple and often competing social pressures and to construct a successful future life.

Reflections on and of Nepal's 'agents of change'

The concept of youth agency tends to be bound up with notions of resourcefulness, ingenuity, resistance and change – whether for better or for worse (Chapter 1; see also Jeffrey 2012). Similar conceptions of youth feature prominently in a range of policies, programmes, and discourses about youth activism and youth participation across the globe (e.g. Durham 2008; Flanagan and Faison 2001; Højlund et al. 2011). In the context of Nepal, public discourses accompanying various political movements, economic transitions, and the establishment of a mass education system during the second half of the twentieth century likewise promoted and manifested a specific socio-cultural construction of the

country's educated youth, one which depicted the younger generation as society's hope for a more prosperous future (Chapter 3).

Such universalising and often simplified representations of youth, however, tend to ignore that educated young people have to negotiate a whole range of social pressures and structuring forces and that they do so in various and uneven ways. As a result, some young people may not be able to identify with these dominant depictions and consequently may not think of these public discourses as a source of inspiration. Based on an analysis of high-profile policy statements of international organisations advocating children's rights, Peter Kraftl (2008: 83) explicitly notes that "despite the best intentions of policy-makers and charities [...], simple representations of childhood-hope that reinforce a stereotype of young people [...] *may* succeed in obscuring any sense of hope (and even agency) in the present or near-future" [emphasis in the original]. In this section I, therefore, examine how young people in Nepal, and specifically public university students in Kathmandu, were represented in public debates in 2011-2012. In addition to asking what youth agency means to others – be it scholars or policymakers, the media, or wider society – I also explore what it means to young people themselves to belong to the newly educated younger generation. I propose that, by taking up this latter question, it becomes possible to move beyond prevalent depictions of youth towards a more refined understanding of the role of youth in processes of social change.

Youth agency in public discourses

One of the first images that captured my attention when I arrived in Kathmandu in September 2011 was a large, colourful piece of graffiti – very unlike the usual political slogans – painted on a long cement wall which was adjoined to one of the city's busiest roads. Life-size capital letters read 'we make the nation' (see Figure 6.1). Each letter was filled with images and messages associated with a hopeful future, often emphasising values attached to education, unity, economic growth, and peace. Additional investigations revealed that this street art was created by a crowd of young people who had followed a call for initiative by two Nepali visual artists, both in their mid-twenties. By painting the wall with colourful and positive images, these two young Nepalis and their helpers sought to make a counterstatement to the many political slogans which otherwise dominated the public space in the city. In an interview published in a local youth magazine (Ghale 2011), one of the project conveners declared: "Wherever we go, politicians have taken over the walls of the city. You see slogans, posters, and symbols everywhere. [...] This is an effort to wake up everyone in the nation to start taking responsibility." But it did not take long for the public space to be reclaimed by precisely those politically motivated messages.

Figure 6.1 Wall painting in Kathmandu, 2011. (Courtesy of Artudio)

When I walked past the same wall again a few weeks later, I discovered that it had been whitewashed and painted over with big scarlet letters in Nepali, announcing a national meeting of one of the major political parties. Other posters and party emblems of political rivalries had already been plastered over it and partly ripped off again, making the wall look somewhat shabby and tattered.

The wall and its record of paintings can be viewed as a projection screen of the most prevalent images commonly attached to educated youth in Kathmandu. On the one hand, youthful activism is seen to provide a potential answer to the many challenges Nepali society continues to face. On the other hand, young people's active involvement in party politics tends to raise concerns which are in opposition to more hopeful perceptions of youth. Such polarised conceptions of youth agency are of course not specific to the case of Nepal (Honwana and de Boeck 2005), nor are they necessarily new (Majupuria and Majupuria 1985; see also Chapter 3). In the context of my analysis, it is, however, interesting to note that such contradictory images of youth as the makers or the breakers of future society still forcefully influence how Nepal's youth in general, and public university students in particular, are represented in public debates. To illustrate this point, I recall the insights I have gained into recently emerging discourses about youth entrepreneurship in Nepal, and into the continuous debate about young people's involvement in party politics – both of which are some the most common themes picked up by the local media.

In November 2011, I found myself among Nepali intellectuals, industrialists, and other public figures in the resplendent ballroom of a grand hotel in Kathmandu attending the first Surya Nepal Asha Social Entrepreneurship Award Ceremony. With this prize the

country's largest private sector enterprise gave recognition to the initiatives of five awardees addressing various social, environmental, and economic problems in innovative ways. The event was promoted as a celebration of entrepreneurial culture in Nepal. It was also an evening which tried to signal hope [*asha*] for future progress. As the keynote speaker affirmed, the awards were given to "those who are society's change agents; those hidden heroes who transform the identity of this country to the better".

The speech, and in fact the entire event, was indicative of the public rhetoric in Nepal which tends to imply that it is only a question of how best to unleash the 'hidden potential' of its young population to realise the hope for a more prosperous future. In the past, such discourses were generally geared towards nation-state building (during the Panchayat regime), Western-inspired modernity (during the multi-party system), or the patriotic struggle for democracy (during the civil war). In most recent times, however, young people's resourcefulness has increasingly been seen to offer a potential answer to the country's economic stagnation, among other problems. Numerous not-for-profit organisations, international agencies, and private businesses have launched a series of programmes encouraging local youth to develop and implement innovative solutions to persisting challenges faced by Nepali society. To quote from an article published in a local newspaper, youth entrepreneurship was seen to be 'the pillar of the future' (Panday 2013).

In part, this newly invigorated interest in young people's entrepreneurial potential can be attributed to global policy discourses, with the World Bank being one of the strongest proponents of youth entrepreneurship (World Bank 2007; see also Jeffrey and Dyson 2013). The approach taken by the different actors in Nepal, however, goes beyond solely encouraging young people to create their own income opportunities. Instead, the younger generation is called upon to tackle broader social, cultural, and environmental issues, and to ultimately bring about positive change for society at large. This was also the message of the widely publicised award ceremony. One of the initiatives honoured by Surya Nepal had started off as a village youth club before it grew into a whole range of development programmes, covering microfinance, education, and media promotion. Another proud awardee of the evening was a young man whose venture had greatly improved daily life in his remote village in terms of access to education, medical help, sanitation, and power supply. Similar youth-led initiatives, ranging from campaigns against environmental pollution to long-term projects for children's rights, frequently featured in the national news (e.g. eKantipur 2012; Kathmandu Post 2011c; Pradhan 2010; Republica 2014). Such success stories gave reason to hope that young Nepalis have the capacity to change things for the better.

Young people's collective impact, however, could also play out in more destructive ways. This became particularly apparent when reading through the various newspaper articles which I collected over the course of my research to gather additional information about TU. The following is a list of the headlines of some of the articles I came across:

- "TU students boycott BBS exams" (eKantipur, January 2010)
- "TU mgmt dept padlocked" (eKantipur, March 2010)
- "Students protest fuel price hike" (The Himalayan Times, March 2012)
- "Students protest tuition fee hike" (eKantipur, September 2012)
- "Students protest re-exam after question leak" (Republica, September 2012)
- "Getting on TU protest bandwagon" (Kathmandu Post, December 2012)
- "Valley traffic impeded following students' protest" (The Himalayan Times, March 2013)
- "MBBS students on the warpath" (Kathmandu Post, June 2013)
- "NSU stages sit-in at TU" (Republica, June 2013)

It seems that the local media primarily reported about TU or one of its constituent campuses when another protest or strike took place. Nepal has a long history of student politics and mass protest movements (Snellinger 2005; see also Chapter 2). In the aftermath of the civil war, however, street protests and strikes of varying scales and impact emerged as the most widespread means of expressing collective disagreement. Considering that in 2010 alone, 1,205 events related to general strikes were reported across the whole country, some local observers have arrived at the conclusion that in the absence of a constitution and good governance, Nepali society has developed a '*bandh* culture'[33] (Shrestha and Chaudhary 2013). In recent years, various interest groups, ranging from journalists to slum dwellers, have resorted to street protests to make public their specific demands. The most effective strikes, which bring public life to a complete halt, are still those that are called by the national political parties and their respective youth wings. Consequently, it is often politically active students who are seen to stand at the forefront of such public remonstrations (see also Snellinger 2010). However, with the costs of such frequent interruptions of daily life falling most heavily on Kathmandu's ordinary residents, the majority of people, including non-political students, were increasingly utterly annoyed by the seemingly never-ending political agitations and by the involvement of young people in party politics.

[33] The Nepali and Hindi word *'bandh'* means 'closed' or 'shut' in English. It is commonly used to describe a general strike, due to which private businesses or public institutions, including schools and colleges, are forced to remain closed and vehicular traffic and public transport often comes to a complete stop, leaving the roads largely deserted.

In addition, there was a rather threatening component to student politics, as political engagements occasionally escalate into vandalism and fights between rival political student organisations. Memories of previous violent clashes were also visible on and around the campus where I conducted my research. For example, the glass of most classroom windows facing the street side had been shattered. I was told that neither the campus administration nor the student union was willing to repair the damage because another student protest was sure to take place. Following such aggressive incidents, it sometimes took little more than a rumour about an apparent disagreement between political student activists for police forces to arrive in large numbers on campus and to patrol the premises. Such occasions strongly underlined the negative connotation of youth agency.

Considering the ways in which Nepal's educated youth are generally represented in the local media and public discourses, it is perhaps inevitable that young people's collective impact is seen as both the panacea for, as well as a menace to, the prosperous and peaceful future Nepali society longs for. In this context, I argue that these seemingly contradictory depictions of youth are essentially mirror images. Either way, youth agency is primarily associated with rather radical and far-reaching effects on social life in Nepal. I further contend that such conceptions are likely to continue to be at work as long as only the most visible subgroups of youth are the focus of attention, thereby giving the impression that these specific forms of youth agency are characteristic of Nepal's young population as a whole. Such generalisations, however, tend to mask a significant degree of heterogeneity among young people and the variety of ways in which young people may appropriate dominant discourses in the light of their own lives experiences. However, precisely because such critical engagements are far more modest than may be expected, they are, by and large, overlooked in the public debate.

Young people's reflections on youth agency

The young Nepalis I spoke with stood out neither as successful entrepreneurs nor as active supporters of party politics. However, when reflecting on the role of educated youth in Nepali society, it became apparent that the images and values produced by popular discourses have also become manifested in the minds of young Nepalis. The focus group discussions I held were particularly instructive in this context. At the beginning of each of the three different sessions, participants were asked to write down on sticky notes what the term 'youth' [*yuba*] meant to them. Here is what they wrote:

- who are energetic and have strong courage to fulfil their dreams
- *deshako sasakta byaktiharu* [manpower of country]
- mentally and physically active and powerful
- those people who are said to be active group, because they earn and learn
- *kehi garni umer* [age of doing something]
- who has idea and courage with action
- strength, education and hard work
- *jimmewāri bodh garne byakti* [person who feels responsible]
- *deshlai bikās garna madat garne abhinna aŋga* [most important organ for the development of the country]
- the age to create new
- agent of social change
- active time/ new ideas[34]

When reading through these written notes, it quickly becomes apparent that certain themes keep reappearing. Notions of change, proaction, innovativeness, and responsibility dominate the words that these young people associated with the term 'youth' [*yuba*]. Youth was regarded as a time in life when people not only came up with new ideas and ways of being, but also actively strove to realise their aspirations or, as explicitly noted by one participant, had 'a strong courage to fulfil their dreams'. Moreover, it is interesting to note that none of the participants stated a specific age bracket. Instead, their descriptions referred to certain behaviours, attitudes, and practices – in short, to ways in which youth was socially constructed. This was not because participants were simply unaware of alternative ways of categorising youth. In the subsequent conversations, they recalled the various age ranges used by different institutions working with young people in Nepal: most bilateral donors and inter-governmental organisations use the range from 15 to 24 years; local youth organisations target persons between 16 to 31 years; and the government of Nepal defines youth as the population group aged 16 to 40. Some research participations also mentioned psychological classifications according to which youth was to be distinguished from children and adults. Nevertheless, there was a general agreement among the focus group participants that in defining youth, the most important thing was to understand which behaviours and attitudes best described the category of youth. The various social identities of young people – their gender, caste/ ethnicity, and class – did not appear to be of much relevance in this context. According to the participants, youth constituted an experience which brought together different individuals in a joint effort to

[34] Participants were encouraged to express their ideas in either Nepali or English, depending on their own preferences. In total, 13 respondents (eight females/ five males) participated in three different focus group discussions (see also Chapter 2). One female participant did not take part in this specific activity at the beginning of the session, because she arrived late.

realise certain transformations which previous generations have been unable to accomplish.

With reference to the written notes stuck on a board visible to everybody in the group, my research assistant, Rajju, who chaired the focus group discussions, prompted further reflections on these largely positive descriptions of youth by asking whether being part of the country's youth meant doing good deeds only. In response, participants further specified what meanings they attached to the term youth and, more importantly, how these associations related to their own lived experiences. In order to illustrate similarities in and differences between participants' interpretations, I choose to quote here in some length from the discussion protocols documenting the three group sessions.

First focus group – February 11, 2012

Anandi: Youth means educated youth who are able to move forward in their life in the right way. There are youth without any direction in life, but education gives direction to life.

Bishal: The destination of our generation is money as well as name. Money is absolutely essential in our life. Name is also important for honour and prestige. Money and name are connected.

Rajju [chair]: What do you think does it take for a young person in Nepal to reach this destination?

Nilima: Education is compulsory. There is no opportunity without education.

Anandi: Yes, but there are also faulty rules here in Nepal. For example, at this place where I applied for an officer job, there was a person who lost his SLC mark sheet, one of the required documents for applying for the job. It is supposed to be a free competition. But his application was accepted, although he did not meet the requirements. This is frustrating, really. His father filled his application.

Rahul: I have similar experiences. For civil job, you need to know people in power, and they take you in. And also, if we compare with our parents, our chances have further declined because of the new quota system.

Bishal: In the 2040s [1980s], education was everything. In the 2050s [1990s], it was education plus skills, because the job market started to be more competitive. Now that we are in the 2060s [2000s], we need education plus skills plus experience.[35]

Nilima: That is true. Certificate has been something that can guarantee you only marriage because parents ask for kids' education as a condition of marriage.

[35] To capture the meaning of Bishal's explanation, I converted the Nepali calendar years to the approximate centuries of the Gregorian calendar. For reasons of accuracy, it should be clarified, however, that the lunisolar Hindu calendar used in Nepal is 56.7 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar.

Second focus group – March 4, 2012

Rajju [chair]: Do you mean that young people only do good deeds?

Deepa: There are two ways to define youth: expected character and natural character.

Himmat: True, even on campus you can see people smoking; both guys and girls. Sometimes, I am very much shocked.

Sujit: These are *ābāra yuba* [vagabond youth]. The word '*ābāra'* means someone who does not have any specific purpose in life. [explanation directed to Andrea]

Karuna: Yes, without a goal in life, it ends up being a destinationless journey, and then nothing would be achieved.

Rajju [chair]: Why do you think some people have a destination and some others do not?

Sumita: Education plays an important role. Educated youth can play a good role in developing the country.

Deepa: But the question is whether education is sufficient?! More than education, experiences change people. Education is just a vehicle of life, not the driver of life!

Third focus group – March 10, 2012

Gita: Youth is about future and destination. Youth is also a state of confusion. We are in a confused state.

Arpita: Youth are confused in Nepal as well as abroad. I think it is because we try to do what is expected from us, but then realise that it does not work out.

Jeevan: Social barriers also lead to confusion.

Sadhika: Youth are confused because of different things. Older people give advice, but it turns out to be irrelevant to today's issues. Also the lack of economic capacity leads to confusion. Children of *thulo manchhe*[36] [privileged person] are not confused.

Jeevan: There is a lack of consistency in goals. We are encouraged to believe that certain things are possible. But then we face situations which do not match with what we are told. For example, education is important. But then you go to campus only to find out that the class is not taking place.

Gita: It is hard for us to reach the destination even if we plan for one. That is why there is confusion.

[36] '*Thulo manchhe*' is a Nepali idiom, which literally translates in English into 'big person'. It is commonly used in Nepal to refer to people who are more privileged, in terms of their economic wealth, political power, or otherwise influential position.

In the course of the conversations, the participants expressed a general desire to conform to prevailing norms. They broadly agreed that it was important to acquire a financially secure status and the respect of other people. In particular, Bishal, a 27-year-old Brahmin man, essentially summarised in a few words what scholars of Nepali studies have described as Nepal's *ijjat*-economy (Chapter 3; see also Liechty 2003; Rankin 2004). Likewise, Deepa and Sadhika mentioned independently from each other that, in principle, they genuinely strove to live up to other people's expectations and to comply with the advice given by elder people. In this context, participants placed a strong emphasis on the significance of formal education for a young person's social reputation and future life chances. It was because of educational attainments, they argued, that young people were able to identify the 'right' way to build a successful future life. In line with the developmental and political agendas of a range of local and international actors, these young people described an educated young person as somebody who has good manners, progressive ideas, and the capacity to contribute to the wider social good. This specific conception of youth has been constantly endorsed by a succession of influential public actors in the country's modern history, which meant that young Nepalis born during the mid-1980s had been exposed to these discourses about the social privileges and obligations of educated youth throughout their young lives (Chapter 3; see also Ahearn 2001a; Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). Thus, it is hardly a surprise that these specific characterisations of educated youth shaped the moral conceptions and social values of this generation of Nepalis.

Although participants expressed a strong intention to live up to the ideal of an educated person and related social expectations, a sense of apprehension and disillusion threaded through these group conversations about what it meant to be part of Nepal's educated youth. The participants were sceptical about the extent to which formal education would indeed allow them to build a more prosperous future life (see also Chapter 5). This did not mean that they questioned the importance of education per se. But in view of their own lived experiences, they were critical of the kind of hopes and expectations others, and especially their families, attached to a university education. In this context, Bishal aptly explained that educational attainments no longer served as an entrance ticket for professional employment. Rather, it required an additional set of social and cultural resources other than school certificates and academic degrees to be able to compete in the highly competitive urban labour market. Furthermore, the stories that Anandi and Rahul contributed to the discussion lend support to the opinion shared by many of their peers, namely that social contacts were more important than qualifications and skills to succeed in the local job market. In view of such sentiments, it is evident that

young people were acutely aware of the gap that existed between the futures they were encouraged to aspire to and the opportunities available to them.

Young people's struggle to align pervasive visions of youth as a repository of hope with the realities of their present-day lives prompts further questions about potential social implications. Research suggests that international migration has opened up opportunities for young people to move towards their hopes for a better future life (e.g. Frederiksen 2002; Newell 2012). For many young people living in countries of the global South, such 'spatial fixes' (Mains 2012) to immediate problems of unemployment and political insecurity are likely to remain a mere dream. In this context, human geographers and anthropologists working with young people in different parts of the world have written about the ubiquity of everyday boredom. Michael Ralph (2008), for example, describes how unemployed young men in Senegal 'kill' an overabundant amount of unstructured time by preparing and drinking tea. Likewise, Craig Jeffrey (2010b) has documented that male students in the north Indian city of Meerut spent long periods hanging out at tea stalls and street corners close to the university campus. Similar observations have been made in the context of Nepal, and specifically with regard to young people studying at universities in the capital city. Mark Liechty (2003: 211) provides a vivid account of middle-class young men in Kathmandu, for whom the social privilege of spending more time in education often simply meant spending more time waiting: for classes to take place, for exams to be written, for results to be published, for vacations to pass, and eventually for an adequate job to become available. More recently, Amanda Snellinger (2010) has argued that this sense of deferment has become constitutive of youth definitions in Nepali politics.

Practices of 'timepass', however, tend to shed a negative light onto the younger population. This is because the apparently widespread apathy among educated young people in parts of the global South has been directly linked to forms of behaviour, which can cause harm to young people themselves and to other members of society. In his work on the problem of educated unemployment published more than thirty years ago, Roland Dore makes a direct connection with the 'revolt of youth' in Sri Lanka in 1971 and further explains that:

> [...] it may be true that *eventually* the educated unemployed will settle down to their fate in the traditional sector, but the process of 'cooling them out' is a tricky and potentially dangerous one. [...] Even more dangerous, because they have a more effective framework for organisation, can be the anticipatory frustration of university and high school students who see unemployment as the only thing they have to look forward to. (Dore 1976: 7; emphasis in the original)

The image of youth as a potential threat to future society is also frequently evoked in more recent accounts. Oskar Verkaaik (2004) found that urban youth were a driving force

behind the Mohajir Qaumi Movement in Pakistan, mainly because these young people thought it was 'fun' to participate in ethnic-religious violence. In the context of the civil war in Guinea-Bissau from 1998 to 1999, Henrik Vigh (2006) discusses how jobless young men were ready to take up arms with the aim to secure a decent life for themselves and their families, often however with fatal consequences. In situations where young people, and especially young men, have nothing to do and little to hope for, they seem to be easily tempted to get involved in political unrest, petty crime, or substance abuse (see also Cole 2004; Mains 2012; Newell 2012; Sommers 2012). Such potentially adverse implications are of particular concern for Nepali society, specifically against the backdrop of the still ongoing political struggle for a new constitution. Young people's involvement in political agitations have therefore attracted the most attention of journalists and academics in recent years (e.g. Ghimire 2005; Hirslund 2012; Mikesell 2006; Snellinger 2010; Zharkevich 2009).

The young Nepalis I spoke with, however, were careful to distance themselves from any kind of disrespectful and potentially destructive behaviour. In particular, the exchange among the participants of the second focus group made explicit that these young people acknowledged that not every educated young person acted in a socially acceptable manner. In their opinion, it was particularly problematic that some of their peers seemed to lack any purpose or direction in life. As Sujit explained, the Nepali word '*ābāra*' is used to describe somebody who wanders around doing nothing. This kind of aimlessness, however, was directly associated with a number of vices, including dishonour, selfishness, irresponsibility, and uselessness. Furthermore, research participants were cautious to maintain a natural stance on party politics. This is partly reflected by the fact that the participants of the focus groups avoided talking about politics, as this was a rather sensitive topic. In individual interviews, however, some of the research participants explained outright that they did not want to be identified with student politics.

> Rajit: N "I myself don't have an interest in politics. I myself don't want to get involved in that. Honestly, if you see the Nepali context, you really wonder who still likes to listen to the views of politicians, no?! I personally don't feel good about any of the major parties."
>
> Sadhika: E "They [politicians] call for more youth participation. They say that young people are supposed to be more involved in decision-making processes. But it's the same old fairy tales, no?! The same has been said twenty years ago. And still today youth are said to be the country's change agents. But I don't know who calls himself a 'change agent'. I certainly don't."
>
> Uttam: E "If you see some people on campus, they can be so easily mobilise. They don't seem to think for themselves. If you tell them 'Come!' they come. If you tell them 'Fight!' they fight. They will just go like a horse! [he puts his hands next to his eyes like blinkers and mimics a furious gallop] 'We can develop the nation! We can! We do!' [said in a loud and angry tone] I don't listen to such things anymore. All we

> get told is to develop the nation. But how? There is no good logic. I don't just follow any person, without knowing what for."

Even if most other respondents were not as vocal about their criticism of young people's involvement in party politics as Rajit, Sadhika, and Uttam, they generally agreed that public anxieties about young people's apparent inability to forge a desirable future were exaggerated. In interviews and focus group discussions, the participants asserted that they tried to plan for the future and were careful to reflect on how their own actions may affect others before making a decision. Thinking ahead, and anticipating the consequences of one's own choices, were consequently seen to be important virtues that allowed a person to gain social respect and to build a successful future life. In this sense, young people's self-conscious reflections on their own actions can be understood as active efforts by themselves to try to improve their own situations and to contribute to the wider social good. Such efforts of 'doing good', however, tend to be largely overlooked by policymakers and scholars alike.

Sustaining a sense of hope and agency in the present

The conversations I had with research participants about the meanings and images of youth reveal much about the points of reference which shaped young people's value systems and influenced their understandings of self. At the same time, these conversations raise further questions about whether and, if so, how their ways of thinking about their present situations and potential future pathways might have helped these young people to make better sense of the contradictions and indeterminacies of present-day life in Nepal. I answer these questions with reference to vignettes of four research participants. This way of retelling the stories of these young people allows for their views, experiences, and ways of being to take a central place. In line with David Arnold and Stuart H. Blackburn (2004), I suggest that these individual accounts can reveal insights into the experiences and attitudes not just of the specific person, but also of the social category of youth, more generally. I was also inspired by the work of Arnold and Blackburn, not least because the authors further emphasise that this way of telling people's lives "is of particular value in seeking to understand and analyze groups that are […] not normally heard" (ibid.: 6).

Rohan

When I first met Rohan in September 2011, I was surprised to find out that he was a student on the campus where I conducted my research. Our first encounter was in a part of the city where a number of international organisations and national NGOs had

established their offices. Catering for the relatively well-paid employees of these institutions, the cafés and restaurants in the area were comparatively pricey. Therefore, I had not expected to meet any public university students here, even though the particular eatery where I was having lunch was less fancy than the surrounding restaurants. Rohan was sitting across the table from me, eating a bowl of *thukpa* [spicy noodle soup], while I was taking notes on my visit to the campus earlier that morning. Suspecting that I was not a tourist, Rohan was curious to find out what I was doing in Nepal. He laughed when I told him about my research project on the university campus and explained that I could as well interview him, since he was enrolled for the master programme in sociology at the very same campus. Rohan had to get back to his office, which was just around the corner. But before he left, we agreed to meet again the next day during his lunch break.

It quickly became part of my routine in Kathmandu to meet with Rohan for lunch once a week. In this way, I learned that Rohan's mother had only limited literacy skills and his father had dropped out of secondary school. His older sister held an MSc degree and, in 2011, was studying for the degree of Master of Arts in Economics. Rohan was proud of her and jokingly added: E "So I also want to continue after completing this master's degree. I have to compete with her!" He was less pleased with his younger sister, who discontinued her studies during the final year of her bachelor programme: E "There is one mandatory English course that you have to pass. My sister thought it was too tough to pass the English course. I said I can help her. But she stopped." Asked about his own studies, Rohan emphasised that he was committed to completing his graduate studies and that he tried to spend at least three hours in the evenings for his studies. Sometimes our conversations ended up being primarily about Rohan's latest readings on the history and anthropology of Nepal and about possible topics for his master's thesis.

Even though Rohan showed a great interest in his subject of study, he never attended the classes on campus. He explained to me that he only went to campus to pay his fees and to pick up his student identification card that permitted him to access the examination hall on the day of final exams. In the same manner he had already completed his bachelor's degree in sociology and English. Rohan self-consciously identify himself as a 'tourist student': E "Tourists go to see places, just out of curiosity, but without really knowing much about them. So, that's why I am a tourist student, because I don't know the people on campus and only go there once in a while when there is nothing better to do". Instead of going to campus himself, Rohan often requested me to enquire about the deadline for submitting a thesis outline, to check for the course companion for sociology in the bookstores located next to the campus, and to find out whether last year's exam results were finally published. Since he did not know any of his fellow classmates, I was

the closest contact Rohan had with the university. Rohan acknowledged that he was partly missing out on the learning environment on campus: E

> "If I would attend classes, I might have indeed some more knowledge. But because of the economic situation it is hard to attend classes. I have to be at work at 9 a.m. But class finishes only between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m. So, it is difficult to go to class early in the morning and still be in the office on time."

He was working as a project assistant for a national NGO, which assisted children from unprivileged backgrounds, including street children and children of squatters, to attain basic levels of education. Rohan aspired to secure a job with an international organisation in Nepal, even though he knew that it was difficult to compete for these lucrative positions: E

> "You know, what really [emphasis] counts in Nepal is your experience. For the job, like UN, when you apply there, they ask you for degrees and so on. But what really counts is three to five years of work experience. How are you supposed to get this experience, if you only start to work after finishing the master's [degree?!"

Rohan explained that it had become difficult for his family to pay for all their living expenses in recent years. Previously, his parents earned sufficient money by running a small grocery shop. But since rents have continuously gone up, it was increasingly difficult for Rohan's parents to cover the costs of the little retail space which was located at the ground floor of a residential house: E "People who own land they have become rich. Like, our neighbours they used to be simple peasants and now they own several houses. Their son is studying in Singapore." Rohan's tone and his facial expressions implied that he did not like talking about the neighbours' son and that he felt slightly jealous. Rohan was also highly critical of the country's national leaders. In his view, politicians were more concerned with making money than with drafting the constitution: E

> "There is a guy. He is not in a high position. Just low government position. He makes Rs. 12,000 a month. But he has five huge houses in Kathmandu. How can you have five houses if you are only paid Rs. 12,000 a month. So you know that he must get money elsewhere as well."

In general, Rohan was careful to distance himself from any kind of dishonourable behaviour. Sometimes a group of young people would meet at our usual lunch place, drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. At these occasions, Rohan would ask me whether we could go to a different eatery, because he did not like smoking. Similarly, he also frequently complained about the influence of student politicians on the campus: E

> "They are just hanging out on campus. This is where they get the connections with the political parties. Through these connections they get a job in the government and will be able to make good money in the future. One time I went to campus to see how the classes were. And I found all students standing outside enjoying the sun, so

> I felt this wasn't worth my time. Also, I don't want the neighbours to think that I might be involved in politics. That's why I don't like going to campus and rather rely on self-study."

Rohan was genuinely committed to improving his own and his family's situation. This meant that he did not only try to contribute financially, but he also did not risk his social reputation.

Anandi

I got to know Anandi, aged 25 in 2011, as a very amiable and obliging young woman. She grew up together with her younger sister and her younger brother in an upper-caste Newar family in the ancient city of Patan, which is located about 3 km south of the old centre of Kathmandu just across the Bagmati River. Anandi's father worked as a lower level government officer and her mother ran a small retail store, selling everything from stationeries to pastries. For Anandi, her family's well-being was a key priority in life: [N]

> "I am the eldest in the house. Therefore, it is my responsibility to give right guidance to my brother and sister. I also have to do what my parents expect from me. I think it is important to do something here. It is my responsibility and my wish to support my family and to take care of the things that I have to do after marriage. These things are important, because they are related to family. My boyfriend also has the same wish."

Anandi's daily routine was organised around family life. She usually got up at 5 a.m. to go to the temple for the morning *puja* [religious offerings]. Then, she came back and made tea for her father. Afterwards, she went to the campus and returned home at around 10.30 a.m. to prepare some food and attend to other chores in the house. In the afternoon, she had time to study, before her younger brother came home from school at 3 p.m. They ate together, before Anandi went to help her mother in the store. She would normally go back to the house to start preparing the dinner at around 6 p.m. By the time, she finished her household duties it was usually 10 p.m. Before going to sleep, Anandi tried to spend some more time preparing for the lectures the following day.

Previously, Anandi was also working as a primary school teacher alongside her university studies and domestic duties. But after she failed the first-year-examinations of her bachelor programme in mathematics, she decided to leave the job and to concentrate on her education. In addition, she swapped to a course at the social sciences department in the hope that it would be easier and less time-consuming to prepare for the exams. Even though she also continued to study sociology at master's level, she was not entirely happy with her choice of subject: [N]

> "I could not decide whether to take economics or sociology, even though I thought about the pros and cons for a very long time. Eventually, I took sociology thinking that it would go smoothly if I took an easy subject. Otherwise, I would have taken economics. But I was concerned that if the subject is difficult, I might get stuck for a long time. But now, what happened is that sociology also turned out to be more difficult. And now I regret that I did not decide for a difficult subject, because in terms of time it probably would not have made a big difference. But the chances of finding a good job would have been better. But I already lost one year at bachelor's level, because I changed the subject. If I do it again, I again will lose another year. That is why, I just continue now."

Despite her best intentions to complete a graduate degree, Anandi did not show much interest in her studies. Going to campus certainly constituted a fixed part of Anandi's daily schedule. Every day, she arrived on campus just before classes started at 6.30 a.m. and returned home immediately after classes finished between 9.30 a.m. and 10 a.m. During this time, however, I usually found her by the tea stalls chatting with friends rather than inside the classroom. 'Bunking classes', i.e. not attending the lectures although one was physically present on, or at least, around campus, was a common phenomenon among the students at the public university campus. In this context, it was very telling that the tea stalls tended to be packed with students during class hours and vacated after classes had finished. When I asked Anandi why she continued going to campus without actually following her course, she explained to me: [N]

> I have to come to campus in the morning. Otherwise, my parents will think I am not studying well. For them, education is the first priority. They are so happy now that my sister is a college topper. But I find no satisfaction in studying. [...] Still, I just need to clear it [the master's degree] somehow.

Anandi's younger sister had successfully completed a medical degree at the teaching hospital in Kathmandu and, in 2011, had started to work at a public-private hospital, specialised in the treatment of cancer. Anandi appreciated that her sister had brought great honour to the family. At the same time, the sister's success seemed to put Anandi under more pressure. While she was not enthusiastic about her university studies, she was also afraid of disappointing her parents. For this reason, Anandi was careful not to jeopardise her reputation as a respectable educated woman and, in turn, also refrained from interacting with her male and female friends outside the campus environment. By going to the campus in the morning, Anandi could meet her friends and, simultaneously, maintain the image of the diligent student that her parents expected her to be.

Sujit

During the first two months of my field research, I was in contact with Sujit, a 26-year-old Dalit man, only via email, because, at the time, he was frequently travelling to the far-

western region of Nepal for work purposes. Sujit was enrolled in the graduate programme in rural development and was one of the students who participated in the campus survey. Hence, I knew that he was employed at the country office of an INGO in Kathmandu. In December 2011, Sujit sent me an email apologising that he had not been in contact for several weeks.

> Dear Andrea
>
> Good morning. I was in field at Far-West for my official work. So, I couldn't reply you on time. Because I am one of the few educated youth in this part of the country, there is various expectation from my home, society and I think from country. From my home, my family members, expects from me to earn money, to guide other member in administration official works and support to educate junior children of family. From my society they want get support in access to the government authority through. Going back to Far-West for work allows me to do something for my community.
>
> Sujit

On a Sunday in January 2012, we finally managed to meet in person in a restaurant at Jamal Road, a traffic bottleneck right in the centre of Kathmandu. Whereas government offices and private businesses in Nepal are open from Sunday to Friday, offices of international organisations are only open five days a week. Thus, Sujit was able to make plenty of time for us to talk that day. He told me that he grew up in a village located at the western border of Nepal in Kanchanpur district. From there, it took about half a day by foot and by bus to reach the district headquarters, Mahendranagar, which is the ninth largest city in Nepal.[37] Sujit's parents were subsistence farmers and were still living in the village. His older brother got married at the age of 14 and subsequently left school in grade eight in order to take up a job in a trading company in Mahendranagar. Sujit, by contrast, obtained a bachelor's degree from a college in the city of Dhangadhi, which is located approximately 65 km southeast of Mahendranagar in the neighbouring district. It took Sujit five, instead of three, years to complete the undergraduate programme. Two times, he was unable to take the exams at the end of the year, because he was involved in development projects located in remote parts of the far-western region.

Sujit was 16 years old when he earned his first income. Previously, he volunteered to participate in a small community building project that he had come to know about through a teacher at his secondary school. Sujit was one of the few people in his village with good literacy and numeracy skills. This was also noticed by the organisers of the development project. In the following year, they offered him to work for a library project

[37] According to the national census of 2011, Mahendranagar has a population of 106,666 people. For comparison, the total population of the urban Kathmandu Valley is approximately 1.3 million (CBS 2012: 41 Table 13).

in Mahendranagar. The job only earned a few hundred rupees, but it gave Sujit the opportunity to learn how to use a computer. In the following years, Sujit worked for different NGOs and development initiatives at district level: E

> "During these past 10 years, I saw so many things in social and development sector. Main thing is I got in contact with government bodies, people in the village administration, different NGOs, donor agencies, women committees and so on. I was mainly engaged in right-based projects against discrimination based on gender and caste. So, I came to know that there are so many laws and acts against these discriminations, only they are not implemented till now. And because of these things people are not getting justice."

Apart from gaining insights into the practicalities and the visions of planned development, Sujit also got a chance to practice his English language skills through his work at the local level. In 2010, he applied for a vacancy published by his current employer and was selected. After working for 1.5 years at the regional office of the INGO, he was offered a post in the Kathmandu office, where he was earning an above-average income. I asked Sujit whether he was intending to stay in Kathmandu in the future: E

> "No, I want to go back to the Far-West. That's good for me. It is my birthplace and I started my career in the development sector from there. I know much more about there than I do about here. I know what the issues are in the Far-West and how to solve them. I have some ideas. I am not saying that I have excellent ideas but a little bit I can assist. So I want to stay there and work there, work for my Far-West [later in the conversation]. One of my colleagues studied in the Netherlands about human rights. He is always telling me about the style of teaching and education system there. But my mind is not set to go abroad. My priority is to study here and work here in Nepal. I also want to be here in order to support my parents. When they are older it will be difficult for them to continue working on the fields."

Sujit was glad that he had to travel to his home district quite regularly as part of his job. Because of Sujit's occupational success, his family was now in a much better situation. For example, Sujit was financing the educational expenses of his younger sister, who, in 2012, was studying commerce at a +2 college in Mahendranagar: E "I convinced by parents that my sister should first complete her education before she gets married. They are always complaining that I haven't married already. I told my parents, I first want to establish myself and then I will move back and marry." Sujit's account illustrates well that it was sometimes difficult for him to reconcile parental and social expectations with rights-based approaches to development, which were an integral part of his professional life. Such contradictions notwithstanding, Sujit was hopeful that he could help his family and the people in his place of origin based on the knowledge, skills, and financial resources he acquired through his job as a development worker.

Narendra

Narendra, aged 24 in 2012, was kind of a class representative of the master's students at the economics department. Officially, the members of the student union were supposed to speak on behalf of the students. Narendra was neither formally elected by his fellow students nor involved in student politics. But still he ensured that students' views were heard. The head of the department of economics described Narendra as a courteous young man and appreciated that Narendra did not simply press demands onto the academic and administrative staff. Rather, he was trying to inspire his fellow classmates and his lecturers to make a joint effort to improve the learning environment. In February 2012, for example, Narendra organised together with other students and lecturers a panel discussion. Among the invited guest speakers were a high-level employee from the Central Bank of Nepal and an economists from TU central campus. The event was well received by the campus administration and by the students, who frequently complained to me that their study programmes offered no opportunities for networking. When I later asked Narendra what motivated him to take the initiative in organising this extracurricular activity, he explained: [E] "People are good in blaming others for not getting any opportunities. But when you point the finger at others [makes the gesture with his hand], three fingers are pointing back at you."

Narendra had spent his entire life in Kathmandu, but his grandparents were originally from a small Tamang village located 80 km in the east of the Kathmandu Valley in Ramecchap district. Narendra maintained closed ties with the village community, especially after he had raised funds to build a primary school in the village: [E]

> "Some people from Kathmandu say 'the village people, they aren't neat and clean.' They don't even stay with them. But I feel very easy staying with them, talking with them. And they feel so happy always saying: 'The small boy, he went to the Kathmandu city and he now is coming back and supporting us to do this school'. Everybody is happy. I really wanted to do something for my village."

Narendra was the first in his extended family to continue to higher levels of education. In 2007, he had been awarded a merit-based scholarship for Kathmandu's private university, KU, and hence had been able to complete his undergraduate studies at Nepal's most expensive institution of higher education. His family was extremely proud of him. The first time I visited Narendra at his family's home in Kathmandu, he pointed out to me, feeling somewhat embarrassed, that his pictures were more prominently displayed in the house than the paintings of Buddhists deities. The walls of the living room were indeed fully decorated with photographs, showing Narendra in his graduation gown and with his bachelor's certificate in his hands.

In late January 2012, I met Narendra in one of the new coffee shops in Kathmandu, which recently started to offer wireless internet connection, at least outside load-shedding hours. When I entered the place, he was sitting at a table with his laptop in front of him. Next to him on the table was a pile of books that read 'GRE prep' and 'The official guide to the TOEFL test'. I asked him whether he was planning to study abroad. My question triggered a torrent of words: [E]

> "Ever since I completed my bachelor's degree, my family has been asking: 'Why don't you just go and apply for a student visa? You should go to the US!' But I always tried to resist myself. But the problem is, if I don't go, we have neighbours and his son or daughter might go abroad and he will send a picture, like sitting in a car. Again my mom or brother will feel jealous, isn't it?! 'See he has already gone.' And then he will send a new cell phone, IPhone to his family. 'See he is sending this, and you are sitting here'. That kind of thing. And for that, in order to resist that society or that talking, it is not that easy. […]
>
> It is really hard to resist that thing. They force so much, you know! And actually the problem is, one generation before us, actually they are not that much educated. So they even don't know what their son or daughter is doing abroad. Most of them that go to the US, they just go for the community college and even that certificate, sometimes, is not even valid. Those that go to Australia, they just go for the vocational training not even academic course. And our family members, they don't know about that thing. They just say: 'You know, my son is there in Australia and he is now applying for the PR [permanent residency].' And that's the kind of difficult thing. They are not understanding. [...]
>
> I told you about the school building project we did in the village. We raised a lot of funds and gave to that school. And that was really a motivation. But our relatives or the people that know us and they just blame you sometimes 'You are not going abroad?!' So what? I am not going abroad. It doesn't mean that I am not doing anything over here. I have been doing this kinds of things over here and your son and daughter is there in the US. What are they doing for the society? [...]
>
> And the problem with us is that we just go when the first best chance becomes available. If I had gone to the US after completing my bachelor's degree, I am sure I wouldn't have this kind of knowledge! But now, I know what I need to do or where I want to be and what is the way or the process for me to be there. I know all this thing. I am very much clear. And if I don't get that thing what are the options. I know that very well. I got this all things, because of communicating, doing hard word, everything. Now it will be very much easy for me to go abroad. And I don't want to be like a second-class or third-class citizen. We only do the one side here, but we don't see what's on the other side. And then we struggle when we get there. We should first prepare ourselves, to get that visa. Why do we have to make this kind of fake documents and just apply here and there?! We'll just get in trouble with the authorities. If we are honest and qualified, they will give [the visa]. [...]
>
> And really the only reason they have for leaving the country is like 'See, I have already done a master's degree and government is not giving me a job.' [...] But I think we also need to take responsibility ourselves. Government cannot do everything. Even we citizens should work for us! But everybody is always just blaming the government. Always! For not getting. Why don't they give something themselves?"

When I met Narendra for the last time in March 2012, he had been offered to assist with a feasibility study for a development project funded by DFID in Ramcchap district. He also had gathered more information on degree programmes in the US. In particular, he was interested in a course offered by the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and the New School in New York. In both cases, he was hopeful that the knowledge he would gain may help him to carve out a career in foreign affairs after returning to Nepal. But he did not want to start the admission process and visa application, before completing his master's degree on the public campus and implementing his idea of adding a library building to the school in the village.

Multi-lane routes towards the future

The stories and sentiments shared by the young Nepalis featuring in this study demonstrate well that these young people were self-consciously aware of dominant expectations for educated youth and, related to this, established notions of social respectability. Moreover, these young people genuinely strove to live up to familial and social expectations. This is particularly well illustrated based on the accounts of Rohan, Anandi, Sujit, and Narendra. While these four young Nepalis came from all walks of life and, in fact, did not know each other, they shared a strong sense of social responsibility. In the first place, this meant that they wanted their parents and their families to be happy. In addition, they expressed a sense of modest hopefulness that their efforts of 'doing good' may also benefit and be recognised by other members of society. From this perspective, their values and ideas for the future were in compliance with dominant discourses about the potential and the social obligations of educated youth to build a better future life for society at large.

At the same time, Rohan, Anandi, Sujit, and Narendra behaved in ways which were largely unexpected in view of active debates about young people's educational and occupational opportunities and related migration trends. Anandi preferred to spend the time she was supposed to commit to her studies instead with her friends, particularly since she had otherwise little opportunity to meet them. She was acutely aware that the campus was perhaps the only place where it was socially acceptable for her as a young woman to mingle with her female and male friends. In order to nurture her social standing as an educated woman and to satisfy her parents' ambition for a university education it seemed to be sufficient for Anandi to go to campus rather than actually attend the lectures. The fact that Anandi's parents lacked an in-depth understanding of what it meant to study at university made it somewhat easier for Anandi to circumvent parental guidance and to spend some time away from her daily duties. Rohan, on the other hand, was mindful of the

way in which masculinity was constructed by and associated with public university students. In terms of his social background, Rohan had much in common with political students leaders, who for the most part are high-caste, middle-class, young men (see also Snellinger 2010). This highly visible subgroup of educated youth certainly influenced how public university students, specifically those with similar characteristics, were perceived by wider society. In order to avoid such potentially negative associations, Rohan refrained from going to campus regularly and preferred to rely on autodidactic methods to realise his ambition for a graduate degree. Both Anandi and Rohan were self-consciously aware of how their presence on or absence from campus may reflect back on them.

The cases of Sujit and Narendra, furthermore, provide evidence against the received wisdom that opportunities for learning and earning are to be found primarily outside the confines of young people's familiar environment. For Sujit, his rural home was a place of significance with respect to both his previous life experience and his future plans. When Sujit went back to the village, he did not return to former conditions and positions (see Parry 2003). Nor can his plan to go back be explained by unfilled dreams or a failure to assimilate into the urban society (see Ferguson 1999). Rather, Sujit acknowledged that his substantial experiences in the field of rural development, his thorough understanding of local concerns, and his willingness to work and live outside urban centres had allowed him to embark on a promising career in the development sector. In addition, Sujit anticipated that it would be easier for him to capitalise on his educational attainments and social resources in the far-western region than in the capital city, where many educated young people had to compete for a very limited number of job opportunities. In a similar manner, Narendra's attempts to map out potential future pathways at home rather than abroad was more than just a second-best alternative. In his view, studying in a Western-Anglophone country was not the silver-bullet solution for the difficulties Nepal's youth was facing. Unlike some of his peers, Narendra was careful to evaluate his options to study abroad without blinding out the potential risks involved in studying and living in a foreign country. Narendra was positive that there were also other ways to gain people's respect without having to follow a trend set by the more privileged sections of Kathmandu's society. With reference to continuous debates about 'brain drain', Narendra sought to distinguish himself as an educated young person who cared for the country's future and took responsibility within his home community. The accounts of Sujit and Narendra made explicit that intimate relations with the home can be of great significance for young people to develop a sense of security and a sense of themselves as competent and successful people.

Although the perceptions and experiences of these young Nepalis deviated from pervasive and often normative discourses about young people's potential futures, it is

difficult to characterise their decisions and practices as forms of resistance or as acts of individual self-help against more authoritative actors, as described by James Scott (1986). It was not the intention of these young people to use practices and mobilities related to their education and work situations in order to challenge dominant future visions associated with the educated younger generation. Rather, these young people tried to make better sense of widespread encouragements to achieve in the light of their own lived experiences, and they did so by appropriating dominant education and occupational strategies. As the term appropriation implies the young Nepalis featuring in this study tried to use the resources available to them by virtue of their socio-spatial identities and, in so doing, were capable of negotiating the multitude of competing social influences that shaped their young lives (see also Rockwell 1996). Consequently, Anandi and Rohan made very different use of the campus, even though they both strove to maintain a good reputation as an educated and well-mannered young person. These findings further underpin the assertion that the vital conjunctures young people experience in relation to their formal education and professional life usually occur in several directions and over different time frames (Johnson-Hanks 2002).

In addition, it is necessary to emphasise that such appropriations were not the result of a 'cooling-out' process. Similar to the four research participants described in detail above, all the young Nepalis I spoke with were generally positive and hopeful that they were capable of improving their own and their families' situations. In contrast to the college students in Burton Clark's (1960) study, the young people I spoke with did not seem to be willing to simply accept their position within the socio-spatial hierarchy in the face of persisting inequalities and constraints. Their small efforts of 'doing good', in fact, helped these young people to grow in confidence and self-respect. In this, I concur with Peter Kraftl (2008: 88), who writes that through small steps and relatively modest coping mechanisms, "diverse fragments of hope may be allowed to foment, small opportunities may begin to present themselves". Perhaps more than did Kraftl, I want to emphasise that the young people I spoke with adopted a kind of multi-lane strategy, in the sense that they sought to map out alternative future pathways without completely abandoning more visionary ideas for the future. Narendra, for example, sought to identify possible ways of building a successful future life at home and simultaneously collected further information about opportunities to study abroad. In a similar manner, Rohan and many of his peers continued their efforts to attain a university education, even though they doubted that these credentials were of much value. In so doing, these young people were able to keep several windows of opportunity open, or at least, prevent them from shutting completely.

Conclusion: Bringing 'ordinary' youth back into the conversation

While it is generally recognised that the category of 'youth' does not indicate a homogeneous group of people, the analysis presented in this chapter reveals that particular conceptions continue to be at work that associate youth primarily with notions of rupture and deviance. I have shown that these images of youth are consistently reproduced through dominant discourses about the role of young people in wider society, mainly because they remain largely focused on specific subgroups of youth. In Nepal, much of the related debate either praises the potential of young entrepreneurs to find solutions for a range of problems faced by wider society or warns against the sometimes destructive force of politically active youth. The kind of actions that are selected for attention consequently further reinforce the idea that young people's collective actions constitute a clear break from the existing social system.

In this chapter I have shown that such an understanding of youth agency does not sufficiently account for the variety and the complexity of the ways in which young people may approach the future. Instead, I argue that it is important to bring 'ordinary' youth back into the conversation. I have done this here by drawing attention to the perspectives and practices of a group of young Nepalis, who remained largely invisible in the public debate. These young people are genuinely trying to live up to familial and social expectations. In this context, the continuous public debate about the role of educated youth in Nepali society certainly served as a point of reference for these young people and influenced their moral conceptions. At the same time, young people evaluated their life chances also based on their own lived experiences and in relation to their socio-spatial identities. Such self-conscious reflections opened up opportunities for more critical engagements with dominant and often normative representations of youth. In line with Johnson-Hanks's (2002) argument, I therefore hold that variations in young people's practices and future orientations should not be exclusively viewed with concern over their seeming inability to realise socially valued future pathways. Rather, I argue that it is important to appreciate the variety of young people's practices as it reveals much about the agency of young people. In this context, I have been particularly attentive to more modest appropriations of dominant educational and occupational strategies, as these expressions of young people's agency remain largely invisible in the public and scholarly debates about the social implications of young people's collective actions.

The findings presented in this chapter also offer a basis for reflecting further on the ways in which young people's positions in socio-spatial hierarchies shape their perceptions of self and their future orientations. In her book on young people's work practices in a remote part of northern India, Jane Dyson (2014) argues that the mischievous behaviour of upper-caste young women in the secluded setting of the forest

needs to be understood in the wider context of gender norms applicable in more public spaces. For similar reasons, female university students in Kathmandu used the campus as a space to socialise with their friends. The spatial dimension of human agency was also clearly evident in young people's decisions regarding certain forms of mobility. The experiences of young urban migrants revealed that the cultural, social and financial resources they possessed tended to be of greater value in their places of origin than in the densely populated urban centre. In some cases, these young people consequently felt that they were more capable of fulfilling their social obligations and contributing to the social good, if they remained relatively settled in their familiar environment. Their ties with the home were, consequently, of great significance for young people to develop a sense of hope and agency.

Conclusions

The stories, ideas, and sentiments shared by young Nepalis attest to the complexity of young people's attempts to identify potential pathways to construct a prosperous future life. Neither the life experiences of previous generations nor modernist discourses of youth as a crucial site for a new and different future provide reliable points of reference for young Nepalis in the light of the realities of present-day life in Kathmandu. Previously well-established life trajectories specific to people's gender and caste/ ethnicity have become more complicated as young people's life chances appear to depend increasingly on their own capacity to take advantage of newly emerging educational and occupational opportunities. The large majority of young people, however, do not smoothly progress through the formal education system and into the labour market and instead divert from dominant and, by and large, Western-inspired models of how the life course should unfold.

This trend towards a diversification of young people's life paths has been observed in similar ways in the context of young people's lives in various parts of the world. Cynthia Lloyd's (2005) survey of young people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America shows that processes of globalisation and urbanisation have significantly transformed the experience of youth and have ushered in new forms of social reproduction. In this context, Lloyd emphasises that "traditional expectations regarding future employment prospects and life experiences are no longer valid" (ibid.: 1). This greater degree of variability and uncertainty has been interpreted by some social scientists as a sign of young people's growing inability to attain socially valued forms of adulthood, raising concerns over potentially adverse social effects of this apparent 'crisis' of youth (Weiss 2004: 14–16; see also Dore 1976; Honwana and de Boeck 2005; Sommers 2012).

It is possible to draw parallels between these studies of youth in other countries in the global South and the situation of young people in Nepal. Processes of economic liberalisation and the mobilisation around formal education in Nepal have played out in highly divergent ways. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult for young Nepalis to capitalise on their educational attainments and to embark on promising career paths commonly associated with the tertiarisation of the economy. Similar to most of their peers in other parts of the world, young people in Nepal, therefore, see themselves confronted with the challenge of aligning heightened aspirations for social ascent and a financially

secure future with the often incompatible realities of their daily lives. Other researchers have linked these developments to the emergence of youth [*yuba*] as a new social category in Nepali society, arguing that youth, on the one hand, represents a crucial site for a new and different future and, on the other hand, is indicative of a growing surplus of adults-in-waiting (Liechty 2003; Snellinger 2009, 2013).

By contrast, my own research with young people in Kathmandu problematises such pervasive depictions of youth as the makers or the breakers of future society. It does so by synthesising different strands of research on youth, aspiration, and mobility. This analytical approach has allowed me to foreground how young people themselves think about their future prospects and why young people may reassess, change or even drop existing future orientations as they get exposed to new ideas and influences over time and across space. In this way, I have developed a fuller understanding of the varied nature of young people's agency. In addition, I have critically engaged with wider debates about the need to produce 'aspirational citizens' and about the relationship between spatial (im)mobility and social ascent. In the remainder of this final chapter, I outline these main contributions to the existing literature on youth, aspiration, and mobility in more detail and point out potential directions for future research.

Youth agency as an expression of sociality and reflexivity

Researchers across the social sciences now broadly agree that young people should not be treated as adults in the making, but as competent social actors in their own right (e.g. Bucholtz 2002; Hall and Jefferson 1976; Skelton and Valentine 1997). However, precisely because researchers working with young people have long been concerned with demonstrating that young people are actively involved in the making of their social spaces, extant research chiefly documents instances in which young people break with the established social order and advertise their own individuality (see Chapter 1). As a result, a large share of the contributions made to youth studies and related sub-disciplines, such as children's geographies, tend to give the misleading impression that youth agency is synonymous with resistance and independent selfhood. However, in order to avoid contributing to the reproduction of stereotypical ideas attached to the category of youth, we have to move beyond primarily searching for evidence to underpin the claim that young people have agency. Rather, we need to explore what types of agency do young people demonstrate (see also Ahearn 2001b; Collins et al. 2013; Durham 2008).

In this thesis, I have shed more light on young people's capacity to act by calling attention to a group of young people who have so far been systematically neglected in public and scholarly debates about youth. The young Nepalis I worked with were not

involved in any spectacular forms of youth activism. Rather, they were committed to studying well and working hard in order to improve their own and their families' situation. Other youth researchers commonly use terms such as 'ordinary' or 'conformist' in order to refer to young people who are not part of a distinct youth subculture and for whom school and work are more significant than fashion trends and party politics (e.g. Jenkins 1983; Woodman 2013; Yoon 2006). Based on my own research, however, I argue that the implied dichotomy between 'conformist' and 'deviant' youth oversimplifies the ways in which young people may negotiate the multitude of social influences that shape their lives.

This is an important point to make, not only within the context of the debate about young people's role in wider society, but also with respect to the relevant literature on the concept of agency. There has been a general tendency to romanticise the agency of subordinate groups – be it young people, women, the indigenous, or the poor (e.g. Durham 2008; Mahmood 2005; Scott 1986). This is because many studies of human agency 'are ultimately more concerned with finding resistors and explaining resistance than with examining power', as Lila Abu-Lughod (1990: 41) aptly explains. Drawing from ethnographic research with Bedouin tribes in Egypt, Abu-Lughod shows that women, on the one hand, did not simply accept the patriarchal system, but often voiced their disagreement in an indirect and shrewd manner. On the other hand, the same young women tended to readily consent to newly emerging systems of dominance in the form of religious education, because of its association with a modern lifestyle. As a result, wider structures of male dominance were often reinforced or at least remained unchallenged.

In a similar vein, I found that the young Nepalis I spoke with tried to set themselves apart from their less educated peers and their parents in order to nurture their own social status as an educated and successful person. To the extent that these young people advanced to higher levels of education, engaged in jobs outside traditional sectors, and were more receptive to new technologies and global migration trends than the parental generation, they indeed seemed to move towards a new and different future. At the same time, it became evident in our conversations that, without the support of their parents, siblings, and friends, most of the research participants would have been unlikely to benefit from newly emergent educational and occupational opportunities in the first place. Consequently, it is difficult to categorise young people's behaviour using the dichotomy of resistance versus compliance. Based on an in-depth analysis of the ways in which young people relate to a range of other social actors, I have been able to clearly show that elements of both resistance and compliance are present in most social interactions, with the result that their specific outcomes for wider society are often hard to predict.

These empirical findings also show that it may not even be in the interest of young people to break from their familiar environment and to demonstrate a greater degree of independence. This is partly because close ties with the family and the home community generally serve as an important security network through which young people are able to access financial support as well as valuable social contacts. For exactly this reason, the pursuit of an urban lifestyle or an international education often constituted a joint family project, rather than a decision that young Nepalis made on their own. But also in the case of those young people, whose families lacked sufficient economic and social resources to provide much support to the offspring, it was still important for young people to 'do something' for their communities and their home country, more generally.

This strong sense of social responsibility expressed by all of the research participants needs to be understood within the context of Nepal's *ijjat*-economy. Young people in Nepal were acutely aware that their social standing was judged not solely with respect to their position within social hierarchies of gender, class, and caste/ ethnicity, but also based on their contributions towards the wider community (Chapter 3). With the emergence of a modern education system in Nepal, these culturally embedded values have become even further manifested in the minds of Nepal's younger generation. National and international policymakers alike continue to promote the idea that it is the responsibility of educated youth to contribute to the social good and to work for the development of the country (Chapter 6). The vision of youth activism emerging from young Nepalis' own reflections and from public discourses differs significantly from prevalent conceptualisations of youth agency, as active efforts to become more independent from cultural or social constructions. Instead, it suggests that young people in Nepal grow in power as they learn to fulfil social obligations and to foster stronger relationships with other people. In line with recent studies of young people's agency in Africa (Durham 2008), Latin America (Punch 2002), and Asia (Dyson 2014), I therefore argue that there is a need to free the concept of agency from its narrow association with resistance and autonomous selfhood.

My work with young people in Nepal, however, differs from these ethnographic accounts in some important respects. While these studies of young people's agency place the focus of analysis on young people's practices as they are observed in the present, I have specifically emphasised young people's narratives about the future. In this respect, it has proven useful to build on Jennifer Johnson-Hanks's (2002) theory of vital conjunctures in order to untangle critical decisions-making situations where the choices young people make or others make on their behalf are likely to have an impact on young people's life chances in the long term. This analytical focus on certain vital conjunctures that young people experience over the course of their educational and occupational careers has

allowed me to elucidate how these young people developed certain ideas about their own future in relation to the social influences and structuring forces that shape their lives. In particular, I have shown that a multitude of structuring forces and social pressures – parents, peers, political leaders, private entrepreneurs, the media – bear down hard on educated young people, as these actors try to project their own future visions onto the lives of the younger generation. But my empirical findings also illustrate well that young people are capable of negotiating such critical situations during which potential futures are under debate in various ways. By framing young people's educational and occupational experiences as vital conjunctures, I have been able to anticipate this curious combination of structures pressing down hard but simultaneously agency being expressed on the part of the young people involved. Thus, I could capture more unexpected and perhaps counter-intuitive variations in young people's perceptions and experiences and in turn developed a fuller understanding of the varied nature of young people's agency.

At the same time, I contend that the concept of vital conjunctures needs further development in order to better account for how young people may rethink existing future orientations as they get exposed to new ideas and influences over time and across space. More than Johnson-Hanks did in her study of young women in Cameroon, it is necessary to attend to the politics involved in the formation of young people's future orientations. By looking more closely at the exact content and nature of the aspirations of educated young Nepalis, I have uncovered the paradoxical nature of aspirations, which can suggest limitations as much as goals. In addition, Johnson-Hanks's strong emphasis on the idea that changes in young people's lives occur across multiple temporalities downplays the significance of different forms of spatial mobility for young people's developing identities and, in relation to this, their future orientations. In order to supplement Johnson-Hanks's theoretical contribution, I have traced young people's perceptions and practices in a variety of socio-spatial settings. These are important contributions that this thesis makes to wider debates in and beyond human geography. I therefore discuss these two points in more detail with reference to the concepts of aspiration and mobility.

The potential and the limitations of politics of aspiration-building

Visions of a new and different future are commonly fed by large-scale structural changes as well as developmental and political agendas for economic growth and social equity Such rhetoric of hope and opportunity are often directed at young people, as they are seen to have still an entire life to build (e.g. Davidson 2011; Kraftl 2008; Meinert 2009; Raco 2009). In the case of Nepal, raised expectations for the younger generation can be specifically linked to the establishment of a mass education system during the second half

of twentieth century (Skinner and Holland 1996; Valentin 2005). The promises associated with the new educational opportunities have, for the most part, not been fulfilled. Even so, I found that hopes for economic progress and social advancement are still kept alive by influential public figures in Nepal: political leaders and international donors, who try to promote micro-level forms of entrepreneurship, or private agents, who seek to sell the dream of studying and living in one of the countries perceived to be at the very centre of the global knowledge system. Consequently, visions of youth as 'pioneers of economic, social, political, and culture transformation' are not only manifested in the National Youth Policy 2010, but are also widely circulated through marketing campaigns, civic development programmes, and mass media in Nepal.

In this respect, I concur with Arjun Appadurai's (2004: 61) assertion that it is important to 'bring the future back in' in order to gain a better understanding of how individuals navigate their social spaces. What people believe might be possible in the future serves as a strong reference point for their decisions and actions in the present, even though the future remains inherently uncertain. This point forcefully emerges from my analysis of the motivations and aspirations behind the choices young Nepalis make with regard to their educational careers (Chapter 4). Academic credentials have come to represent a valuable cultural resource, as they promise to enable the younger generation to gain social distinction and to improve their own and their families' economic situation. Families from across the social strata are therefore willing to spend a large share of the household's budget for their children's education. As a result, a growing number of young Nepalis, including those who come from social groups previously not represented at university, have been able to follow educational trajectories that bear no comparison with the much more basic levels of education attained by the parental generation. In view of this generational disjuncture, Debra Skinner and Dorothy Holland (1996: 291) have argued that educated young Nepalis 'were creating new identities and self-understandings that resisted older forms of privilege'. While I agree that educational success was an important source of self-worth for the young Nepalis I spoke with, I contest that these young people were resisting or even dismissing established norms and values. Rather, I found that young people's aspirations for a future life that would be different from that of their parents or their less-educated peers merely reflected widespread social expectations for educated youth. Based on these empirical findings, I hold that a future-oriented approach to young people's agency opens up new perspectives as it calls attention to the collective future vision which informs the choices individuals make.

At the same time, my study shows that such politics of aspiration-building are often only of limited success. In part, this is because socially instilled aspirations tend to reproduce existing social inequalities. There are some parallels here with recent research

on the politics involved in the formation of young people's aspirations. Similar to studies conducted with young women in India (Donner 2005; Rao 2010), it became apparent in the conversations I had with young Nepali women that they strove to attain higher levels of education, mainly because they wanted to conform to the image of a modern, educated woman in the hope of entering a favourable marriage arrangement. In comparison, young men sought to keep pace of the educational race in order to live up to established notions of respectable masculinity, which meant that they sought to take financial and social responsibility for their families and the wider community. Because of these established gender roles, young men also felt pressured to migrate abroad, whilst young women felt discouraged to even obtain more information about international degree programmes (Chapter 5).

In this context, I furthermore found that the social practices of Kathmandu's upper-middle class and the established elite serve as important points of reference for aspirational young people, who attempt to map out potential ways of constructing a prosperous future life. A private education, a foreign degree obtained in a Western-Anglophone country, and a job in the development industry were seen to be highly desirable life achievements, not least because they were closely associated with the urban propertied classes. In this respect, my findings also lend support to studies conducted in countries in the global North, which likewise reveal that efforts to produce 'active, responsible, educational citizens' tend to reassert middle-class hegemony (Reay 2008; see also Davidson 2011; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Raco 2009).

Moreover, the idea that the production of 'aspirational citizens' will lead to enhanced opportunities for social ascent ignores that young people's difficulties to become upwardly mobile cannot exclusively, and sometimes not even primarily, be attributed to low aspirations. Similar to other researchers working in Nepal (Liechty 2003; Valentin 2005) and in countries in the global South, more generally (Jeffrey 2010b; Mains 2012; Meinert 2009), my observations imply that encouragements given to young people to capitalise on their educational attainments tend to take little account of the wider social, political, and economic circumstances that shape young people's lives. At times of lingering political and economic crisis in particular, discourses of hope and opportunity may consequently raise young people's anxieties regarding the future, rather than provide a source of inspiration. This is because young people's future orientations are never entirely or exclusively framed by the future visions that other social actors try to project onto them. On the one hand, first-generation university students in Nepal seemed to embody the widespread hope that newly emergent educational and occupational opportunities also opened up possibilities for a greater degree of social equality. On the other hand, these young people had to realise that conventional tokens of success, such as

a university degree or urban life, no longer fulfilled the promises they once held, as more privileged social groups sought out educational pathways for their offspring outside the state system, or even outside the country. With reference to similar situations in the case of young people in African countries, other researchers have expressed concerns over the imminent risk for the link between young people's hope for a better future and its fulfilment to be cut (Mains 2012; Sommers 2012; Vigh 2006).

My analysis, however, suggests that young people were generally capable of negotiating such pressured situations in an effective manner. In our conversations, it became apparent that young Nepalis seriously thought about what motivated them, which resources they could draw from, and how certain steps might help them to achieve their future objectives. At the same time, these young people were self-consciously aware of the gap that exists between the future they felt encouraged to aspire to and the realities of present-day life in Kathmandu. Such reflections opened up opportunities for more critical engagements with dominant and universalising discourses on the role of educated youth in society. In line with Peter Kraftl's (2008) work on hope and childhood, I hold that it is highly instructive in this context to account for both dominant discourses on the role of youth in wider society and young people's own articulations of hope. More specifically, I argue that particular attention needs to be paid to the small and often unexpected steps that enable young people to maintain a sense of hope and a positive outlook regarding their own future lives. This is because I found that such modest forms of hoping may constitute valid coping strategies that allow young people to make better sense of the disconnect between dominant future visions and the realities of their everyday lives.

Consequently, the value of a future-oriented approach to young people's agency is that it allows grasping how young people actively plan and plot their actions not only based on lived experiences, but also in anticipation of the opportunities and constraints that may present themselves in the future. My findings illustrate well that young people negotiate important decision-making situations during which potential futures are under debate by drawing on various points of reference, whether these are in the now and here or imagined as yet to come. As a result of such self-conscious reflections young people's aspirations were not simply 'cooled out'. Through modest appropriations of dominant educational and occupational strategies, young people were instead able to sustain a sense of hope and agency in the present, without completely abandoning more ambitious plans for the future. I therefore argue that educated young people in Kathmandu were able to move towards a hopeful future along multi-lane routes.

In view of these findings, I furthermore contend that Appadurai's (2004) conceptualisation of the capacity to aspire requires some modification. My findings clearly show that it is not sufficient to strengthen young people's capacity to envision promising

educational and occupational pathways in order to enable them to improve their lives. An analysis of young people's life chances instead needs to verify to what extent such heightened aspirations tally with the economic and social opportunities available to young people. By attending to how young people's future orientations relate them to other social actors, I have been able to develop a better understanding of young people's capacity to act upon the world reflexively, yet without neglecting the limits to young people's agency in the form of social hierarchies and structural constraints.

Navigating an interconnected world

Much of the active debate about the intensification of human mobility tends to imply that it is possible to distinguish between movers and non-movers (e.g. Cohen and Sirkeci 2011: 87–96; Hammer and Tamas 1997). Such a sharp distinction, however, starts to become blurred once various forms of mobility and the ways in which they are connected to each other and across different scales are taken into consideration (Adey 2010; Cresswell 2010, 2011). The young Nepalis featuring in this study had no personal experiences of cross-border travels and hence seemed to be relatively immobile in comparison with the growing number of international migrants, who have been given most attention in the scholarship on migration and mobilities (see also Fortier 2014). However, it emerges from my fieldwork that the young people I met in Kathmandu were directly affected by the trend towards out-migration from Nepal. They were constantly exposed to images of foreign countries and to the stories of diasporic Nepalis through educational marketing, mass media, online interactions, and, in a few cases, kinship ties. Such encounters formed an integral part of young people's lives in Kathmandu, not least because they had to crisscross the city on a daily basis in order to attend to their studies at university and to their jobs in offices and schools located in different parts of the city. By applying a more comprehensive perspective to young people's spatial practices as promoted within the 'new mobilities paradigm', I have identified various ways in which educated young people in Kathmandu were actively engaged in different forms of spatial mobility and immobility. In so doing, I offer an account of young people's mobility practices and related social effects which complicates dualistic classifications of youth and adds to our understanding of the relationship between mobility and immobility, more generally.

Several scholars involved in research on mobility topics have critically noted that, in contemporary social thought, spatial mobility is commonly associated with a greater potential for liberation and social ascent, whereas spatial immobility has increasingly acquired the connotation of backwardness, of failure, and of being left behind (e.g. Adey et al. 2014; Cresswell 2006; Morley 2000). The same tendencies can be observed in the case

of Nepali society. The ways in which specific places are promoted as being more developed and sophisticated reinvigorate fantasies and desires that drive people to move to the city or further afield in search of presumably better lives elsewhere. My empirical findings suggest that dominant future strategies for social advancements were largely 'anti-local' in the sense that places located beyond the confines of young people's familiar environment were generally perceived to be more advanced and sophisticated. To some extent, this spatial connotation of opportunity and prosperity is closely bound up with the culturally embedded concept of *para*, which implies that it is necessary for people to move beyond the regular boundaries of home in order to take advantage of better opportunities elsewhere (Chapter 3). As a result of the changes in the educational and economic landscape of Nepal, a hierarchy of desirable destinations for education has emerged, with more distant places being ranked highest (Chapter 4). Young people who grew up in parts of the country located outside the Kathmandu Valley, therefore, commonly aspired to relocate to the capital city and those who were living in the capital city for a longer period aspired to migrate abroad. Thus, it can be concluded that young people's future orientations were significantly shaped by their socio-spatial origins, with the result that rural youth perceived of themselves as being less ambitious and progressive than their urban peers (Chapter 5). For similar reasons, many of the young people I spoke with also felt anxious about the fact they were only indirectly connected with place outside Nepal's borders. Such sentiments of lagging behind simply because people feel rooted in their home communities are indicative of the power of modernist and developmental discourses and the imagined geographies they produce to locate people on the margins (see also Massey 1993).

Despite such prevalent sentiments, I found that the relationship between young people's mobility practices and their chances of social ascent is much more complex than dominant discourses suggest. In this respect, my work contributes to a strand of research, which shows that people's movements are structured by gender, class, and ethnicity, and that migration in turn affects social relations and people's life chances. With reference to research into rural to urban labour migration in countries in Asia and Africa, Arjan de Haan and Ben Rogaly (2002: 6) aptly summarise this point, as they write that "the specific way in which migration is arranged and what it means to particular people is bound up with social identities. Who the migrant thinks she or he is affects the type of migration." In line with this argument, I have discussed that education-related mobility was seen to be a way for young Nepalis to distinguish themselves from their less-privileged peers, who were said to carry out manual work back in the village or low-prestigious jobs in countries in the Gulf region and Southeast Asia. But I have also shown that such prevalent associations between young people's identities and their spatial practices sometimes

worked out in reverse. For the urban migrants I met in Kathmandu, the fulfilment of the dream to study and live in the capital city went hand in hand with the realisation that they were perceived to belong to a low-income section of Nepali society, because their places of origin were closely associated with notions of poverty and backwardness (Chapter 5). For similar reasons, some young men, unlike most young women, avoided going to campus regularly, because they feared to be related to campus-based and predominately male student politics, as such an association would have posed a risk to the social reputation these young men sought to maintain (Chapter 6). My empirical findings illustrate well that the social implications of people's spatial mobilities need to be explored in relation to both people's self-perceptions and the socio-spatial identities that are delivered back to them from others.

A further contribution this study makes to the ongoing debate about enhanced levels of human mobility and potential social implications relates to the question why some people remain relatively immobile. The insights I gained into young people's time-space-strategies suggest that the decision to stay rooted in place is not necessarily only a back-up plan, but may as well be a preferred option. Similar to Peter Fischer and Gunnar Malmberg (2001), I found that young people were sometimes able to utilise and maximise their 'location-specific insider advantages'. The knowledge and experiences that some young Nepalis acquired locally, and specifically at the village-level, significantly gained in value the moment these insights opened up opportunities to secure one of the highly sought-after jobs with an international development organisation (Chapter 6). However, it also became evident in the conversations I had with young Nepalis that the decision against leaving behind their homes was not purely a rational choice made in view of the opportunity costs involved in relocating to an unfamiliar place. Rather, it was also a matter of emotional and social connectedness. Despite all the difficulties of present-day life in Nepal, I found that young Nepalis expressed a profound sense of responsibility for their families and for the future of their home country, more generally. Such insights into young people's relationship with home [*ghar*] put into perspective widespread concerns regarding the much lamented 'brain drain' and the potential costs for Nepali society.

This study then confirms and supplements some of the ideas central to the 'new mobilities paradigm'. By calling attention to a group of young people who have so far remained less visible in mobilities research, I have unpacked the complex relationship between mobility and immobility in some interesting ways. On the one hand, I have demonstrated that these seemingly sedentary youth were actively engaged in a number of different forms of mobility and, in fact, no less affected by the great degree of global connectivity than their migrant peers. More importantly perhaps, I have shown that young people's decision to remain relatively rooted in place cannot be entirely explained by

unequal power relations due to which the potential for mobility is unevenly distributed within and across societies (Massey 1993). Rather, I want to place an emphasis on the cases of those young people, who were able to accumulate relevant cultural and social resources, precisely because they were relatively entrenched in their home communities (Chapter 6). Based on this evidence, I argue that forms of spatial immobility may help young people to navigate an increasingly interconnected world in an effective manner.

Future directions

This thesis offers in-depth insights into how young people's potential futures are being constructed and contested by a range of different social actors, and imagined and reworked by young people themselves. In so doing, my research contributes to ongoing debates about the conceptualisations that shape research with young people and the underlying assumptions that prime social scientists to enquire into the relationship between young people's collective actions and processes of social change and reproduction. In addition, my work provides new empirical data to the literature on Nepal, as it calls attention to a group of young Nepalis, who have so far been less visible both in public and scholarly debates. For these reasons, I hope that it is also of interest to practitioners and policymakers working with young people in Nepal and elsewhere. Accordingly, my research approach and the findings I have presented in this thesis have implications for future research as well as youth-related projects outside academia.

With regard to the former, I can discern one limitation my study has in common with the work of Liechty (2003) and Snellinger (2010): each of us has primarily focused on what it means to be a part of the country's youth within the urban context. This is an interesting aspect by itself, since traditionally a large share of the research conducted into young people's lives in Nepal has been village-based studies (e.g. Ahearn 2001a; Ragsdale 1989; Skinner 1990). While these earlier accounts have admirably documented how young people's lives have been bound up with processes of social change related to the expansion of formal education, they did not fully develop the idea that youth has emerged as a new social category in and of itself. Liechty (2009) justifies the focus on the urban context based on the fact that young Nepalis living in the rural areas of the country traditionally had to accept responsibilities associated with adulthood at an early stage in life, which in turn meant that the experience of youth was significantly shortened. This explanation, however, no longer seems to hold true. Around the same time when I was conducting my field research in Kathmandu, other scholars have started to look into the ways in which youth is socially constructed in the context of rural Nepal. In particular, Ina Zharkevich's (2014) work on Maoist youth in a remote area of Rolpa district and Birgitte

Lind Petersen's (2011) study of secondary-school children in the far-western part of Nepal provide evidence for the existence and the relevance of the concept of youth in rural contexts. Specifically because my study has underlined the spatial connotations of vital conjunctures occupied by youth, it would be interesting to follow up these separate studies with a comparative analysis of the experience of youth in these very different spatial contexts.

With regard to potential implications for policymakers and practitioners, it is important to note that my study clearly prioritises understanding the potential of and limits to young people's agency over making recommendations for any sort of assistance to young people to act upon the world effectively. Nonetheless, I contend that it would be relevant to review the efficiency and impact of programmes and discourses targeting the younger population. In the case of Nepal, national and international actors have made heavy investments to establish a Ministry of Youth and Sports (in 1995), and to draw up a National Youth Policy (published in 2010 but so far not legally enacted). At the time of my fieldwork, countless education and employment schemes were put in place with the aim to increase youth participation in policymaking and other social processes. In addition, Nepali and foreign scholars, among them Himali Dixit, Heather Hindman, Amanda Snellinger, and Sujit Shrestha, are currently working on research projects relating to various forms of youth activism in Nepal. In this sense, all major public actors and political forces seem to agree that there is a need to create opportunities for the youth of Nepal. Yet all these commendable and necessary efforts may only be of limited efficacy if the actors involved continue to neglect the diverse ways in which young people try to forge out a future and the subtle changes which are already taking place. With my research I hope to have set a starting point for a more comprehensive understanding of youth by providing a nuanced perspective on young people's capacity to bring about the future changes hoped for by wider society, and by giving a voice to those young people whose opinions and ideas have so far remained unheard.

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