1   Working with young people in the Himalayas

On a frosty morning in November 2004 I was huddled against a tree in a forest high above a village called Bemni in Uttarakhand, India. Far below I could see the river Nandakini; above stood the 7,000 metre crimson peak of Trishul. I was with two girls, Bina and Basanti, who were collecting leaf litter to be used as bedding in livestock stalls. Bina and Basanti were only twelve years old. Their thin hair was plastered to the side of their faces with sweat and mist as they stuffed their baskets with leaves, wove twigs across the top to keep them in place and fastened their back-breaking loads with thick rope over their shoulders. Basanti was taller and more athletic, but Bina seemed the more adept at constructing a leaf basket. Before they set off back down the hill they checked that their loads were big enough. They asked me to compare the two piles of leaves. When they were absolutely sure that they had what their parents would regard as 'good baskets' (*atchchhe kandhe*) they tore down the steep hill singing songs, their nimble feet picking expertly over the rough, stony ground.

This book examines the working lives of young people in a remote part of north India. During fifteen months of ethnographic research in Bemni I charted young people's involvement in rural household labour. I followed girls such as Bina and Basanti through fields, up mountains and into forests, and spent hours chatting in the village with children and adults. At one level, *Working Childhoods* is a study in the social geography of children's everyday labour in a high Himalayan village. It chronicles what work children did in Bemni in the early 2000s, when they did it, with whom, and with what consequences for their own developing identities and for broader household livelihood strategies. The book stands as a record of a set of work regimes. It describes the resilience of young people, who worked in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions to fulfil household obligations, even as their lives were being transformed by the extension of the nearby road network, the expansion of schooling and changes in local marriage practices.

The book also examines how young people's agency might be theorised, agency being defined as 'the ability to act effectively and exercise a measure of power' (Durham 2008: 175). I argue that young people developed a sense of agency not primarily through opposing older villagers but by acquiescing to

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their demands. The concern that Bina and Basanti showed to stuff their baskets with leaves and meet village expectations of what constitutes 'good work' was indicative of a general desire among children to conform to prevailing norms. I also argue that young people's agency was not primarily about asserting autonomy but focused on building relationships of mutual dependence with each other and their parents. In addition, I highlight the crucial importance of the forest in young people's work and in developing a sense of themselves as competent, 'good' people. Young people cultivated a sense of their own capacity for work and identity through their tactile use of the environment and its materials: trees, leaves, branches and streams, for example. This focus on young people's complicated and rich relationship to the natural world provides a counterpoint to the focus in most of the literature on children and youth in urban areas. It also underlines the importance of thinking about the 'environment' as a setting for cultural practices as well as an economic resource.

Throughout the book I use the word 'children' to refer roughly to young people aged five to thirteen and 'youth' to indicate young people aged fourteen to seventeen. This distinction is broadly in line with how parents and young people in Bemni understood the terms 'child' and 'youth'. I use the term 'young people' as an umbrella term for children and youth. I am nevertheless aware that the terms 'children', 'youth' and 'young people' are slippery, and they are deployed in different ways in different circumstances (see Durham 2008; Solberg 1997).

Young people's agency

There is now a great deal of scholarly research on the burdens being placed on younger sections of the population in the contemporary global South. In the context of the rise of new media and heightened expectations around education, parents and wider society are often looking to young people as sources of hope. At the same time, market-based economic policies have often increased social uncertainties and undermined state welfare mechanisms, such as government-funded schools, health care programmes and development schemes. The extension of new forms of governmental and non-governmental power has frequently had the effect of marginalising young people or pathologising their behaviour (see, for example, Gibson 2011), and environmental degradation and the restructuring of families often complicate young people's lives still further (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Jeffrey and Dyson 2008).

My research points to the capacity of young people to respond actively and creatively to some of these pressures. The agency of young people is, of course, a well-established theme in studies of childhood and youth (Boyden and Ennew 1997; Bucholtz 2002). In childhood studies, the shift to stress agency came in the 1960s and 1970s and marked a move away from sole emphasis on

the socialisation of children (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). In youth studies, the move to emphasise agency came earlier and was bound up in an interest in 'rebellion' (Hall 1904; Keniston 1971; Willis 1977). Since the 1990s the children's agency literature and the youth agency literature have both expanded enormously, with a welcome increase in studies of girls and young women (see McRobbie 2004), young people in the global South (for example Ansell 2004; Honwana and de Boeck 2005) and children and youth as political actors (such as Philo and Smith 2003; Hirschkind 2011). Among notable studies is Jennifer Cole's (2004) account of how poor and lower middle-class young people in Madagascar reacted to economic scarcity in the 1990s. Cole shows that young women in her research area were able to make money through sex work and actually came to support young men financially. In the process, they questioned and partially contested established gender norms. Kate Swanson's (2009) work on young beggars in urban Ecuador is similarly compelling, demonstrating how young people survived in the early 2000s through migrating to cities, where they managed to use the money they earned from begging to finance their studies in urban schools. The picture emerging from such studies is of young people's extraordinary resourcefulness, even in unpromising circumstances.

Another theme that stands out in these recent studies is the significance of work as a site for young people's social and cultural agency, and, especially, the capacity of young people to instil meaning in their work. For example, Pamela Reynolds' (1991) assessment of children's labour in rural Zimbabwe documents the creative way in which children may imbue their work with a sense of purpose and achievement. Reynolds shows that children imagined their work simultaneously expressing their love for family members, fulfilling moral duties to their parents and contributing to the costs of attending school. In a markedly different case, Paul Willis (1977) comes to somewhat similar conclusions. In his classic study of young working-class men in a town in the English Midlands, he shows how a set of working-class 'lads' – through their everyday practices of fighting, sex, smoking and other means of 'having a laff' – came to view manual labour as an 'authentic' basis for masculinity and successful adulthood. As Willis's research shows, children and youth, in imbuing their work with meaning, often develop distinctive gendered subjectivities, for example as masculine wage earners or diligent workers (see also Jackson 2000; McDowell 2003; Ramamurthy 2010).

Young people also try to negotiate their work within the constraints imposed on them by employers, parents or broader social structures in order to develop their own work 'regimes' (Gidwani 2001). For example, children may alter the content and nature of their labour, change the spaces and timing of their work practices or reshape the social context of their work. Samantha Punch's (2000) research in Bolivia provides a good case. Drawing on participant observation in rural Bolivia, Punch shows how children accommodate their own needs

and desires within work settings through a range of micro-strategies aimed at moderating the burdensome nature of their labour. Similarly, Reynolds (1991) identifies how children in rural Zimbabwe altered how they conducted herding, agricultural work and fuel wood collection in order to bolster their social links with kin and neighbours and improve their future security. Cindi Katz (2004) focuses more resolutely on the ways in which children mix 'work' and 'playful' activity and how these combinations may shift over time. Building on close observation of children's herding, water and fuel wood collection, and agricultural work, Katz documents how a state-sponsored agricultural project initiated in their village in the 1980s disrupted children's capacity to combine work and play by expanding irrigated agriculture for the market, encouraging deforestation and reducing cattle herds. In undermining the subsistence-oriented economy of the village, this development project also reduced the capacity of children to 'manage' their everyday work in meaningful ways.

My study is centrally taken up with examining how young people instil meaning in their work and negotiate their labour in a context of social transformation – especially in light of their growing commitment to acquiring an education. In drawing attention to the importance of how children negotiate labour, I point to the difficulties associated with 'reading off' the burdensomeness of work with reference to the physical arduousness of their activity (Jackson and Palmer-Jones 1999). Rather than assuming children's work to be exploitative, or seeking an easy measure of burden and effort, I highlight the value of fine-grained accounts of young people's everyday experience of labour.

Generation is also a prominent topic in this recent work on young people's agency and working lives in the global South, and it is an issue that surfaced quite often in discussions with parents and young people in Bemni in 2003 and 2004. In the 1970s and 1980s in Bemni, young people usually married in their teens, frequently in their early teens in the case of girls. This meant that they became 'adults', in local terms, at a fairly early stage. But rising education and an increase in young people's age at marriage has altered this pattern and precipitated the emergence of a new generation of 'youth' (*jawaan*) aged between their early teens and early twenties. In his classic essay on generations, Karl Mannheim (1956 [1923]) argues that particular generations experience the same events at the same period in their lives and that these shared experiences could become the basis for a type of generational identity. He builds on this observation to suggest that generations could become social and political actors in particular situations, emphasising the young generation, in particular, as an agent of change. Young people are often closer to pressing socio-economic problems and they are more likely to engage in novel cultural, social and political practices. In Mannheim's terms, young people have a 'fresh contact' with their surroundings (Cole and Durham 2006; Shahine 2011).

Mannheim's research is helpful for my purposes because it both emphasises questions of generational change and highlights the importance of young people's relationship to surrounding landscapes, objects and materials. 'Fresh contact' implies an interest in how children and youth use materials at hand, such as leaves, baskets and branches. But Mannheim is only partially useful as a guide to young people's agency in Bemni. By emphasising situations in which people exert agency through opposing established structures, Mannheim downplays the possibility that children and youth might exercise agency through conforming to prior practices and norms. Saba Mahmood (2005) advances a somewhat similar version of this argument about conformity and agency in her ethnography of the Da'wa religious movement in Egypt. Contrary to what many US feminists might have expected, many Egyptian women active in religious organisations are not seeking to challenge patriarchal norms or established gendered hierarchies. Rather, they are trying to find niches within dominant hierarchies that can provide a measure of respect and security while also allowing them to bring their behaviour into line with their religious beliefs. Mahmood builds on these observations to argue that 'agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms' (15). Deborah Durham (2008) makes a related point in research with young people in Botswana. Young people exert their own power in this setting not by trying to escape established social institutions but by reinforcing them. I will develop this argument through discussing how young people in Bemni abide by the wishes of their parents and older villagers while also advancing their own goals.

Another difficulty with Mannheim's work from the point of view of my interest in young people's lives in the Himalayas is that he suggests that youth characteristically become 'agents' through asserting independence, and in particular by breaking from their families. 'Fresh contacts play an important part of the life of the individual when he is forced by events to leave his own social group and enter a new one – when, for example, an adolescent leaves home' (Mannheim 1956 [1923]; quoted by Durham 2008: 168). This argument reflects the intellectual climate of the 1920s and 1930s, when Mannheim was writing. The rise of romanticism in the nineteenth century led to a new emphasis on childhood as a period of dependence on the family. It followed that 'youth' was the stage of life in which people freed themselves of kinship ties. This vision of youth also influenced mainstream youth studies in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Much of the early writing on young people referred to youth as a 'stage' in which people gradually learnt to sever links with senior kin and build their own independent lives (see, for example, Hall 1904; Mead 1928; Piaget and Inhelder 1958; Keniston 1971). Likewise, many scholars of young people's agency in the 1980s and 1990s frequently looked for instances in which young people broke from their kin (see Durham 2008).

There are several problems with the notion that young people express agency by emphasising their independence. First of all, those espousing this view risk presenting as a sociological 'fact' what should be analysed as a product of power. As Nikolas Rose (1998) and Graham Burchell (1996) have shown, powerful institutions in the last quarter of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century have often tried to instil in people the notion that they are 'individuals' who must tackle historical disadvantages through assuming responsibility for their own lives (see World Bank 2007).

The notion that youth become more independent as they mature and break from their kin also distracts attention from the extent to which young people build social relationships – with each other and with older kin or non-kin – in order to acquire a sense of agency. This is a theme of numerous recent studies of young people, especially but not exclusively children and youth in Africa, Asia and Latin America. For example, Durham (2008) has argued in research in Botswana that young people's maturity and agency are measured in terms of their ability to invest in traditional social networks. A mature, responsible person in the place where Durham worked is one who is able to maintain multiple relationships of interdependence rather than express his or her own independence (see also Hoffman 2008). The manner in which young people exercise agency through building social relationships emerges even more clearly in research on young people's work. For example, Reynolds (1991) argues that young people in Zimbabwe in the 1980s developed a sense of their own maturity and pursued their goals by conducting household work for elder kin. The transition from child to youth in this context was marked by young people's ability to show through their everyday labour their love and respect for elders. Olga Nieuwenhuys (1994) makes similar points in her assessment of children's work routines in Kerala, south India. In this case children used paid work outside the home and unpaid domestic labour as a means of fulfilling moral obligations to their parents and other senior kin. Paid work outside the home was gendered: boys were mainly involved in scavenging for fish as a means of developing an identity as successful providers, while girls sought respect through producing coir yarn in the home. But boys and girls were united in their desire to strengthen relations of interdependence within the household, and thereby raise their status within it. My study builds on the work of scholars such as Durham, Reynolds and Nieuwenhuys. The agro-pastoral system characteristic of Bemni requires parents and children to coordinate their various activities closely, and to do so in different ways at different times of the year. Children and youth also cultivate numerous connections among themselves, often on the basis of friendship and in their everyday spaces of work.

In the context of Bemni, it is also important to stress the limits to young people's social agency. There is much research highlighting how caste, class,

gender and other inequalities shape young people's actions while working
(such as Aitken 2001; Da Costa 2010). In addition, young people often
reproduce caste, class and gender identities and other pernicious norms. Willis
(1977) similarly shows that the lads at the centre of his study often challenged
notions of class improvement through education, and thus resisted broader
social structures in certain ways. At the same time, however, working-class
boys reproduced misogynistic views, and to some extent also racist attitudes.
Willis therefore argues that young people often make 'partial penetrations' of
wider structures. They apprehend some aspects of dominance but reproduce
other dominant norms. Such 'partial penetrations' repeatedly surfaced in the
everyday work practices of young people in Bemni.

Young people and the environment

Young people's relationship to the rural environment is the other major theme
of this book. I use the word 'environment' to refer broadly to people's nat-
ural surroundings. The term is somewhat problematic, though, because of its
tendency to suggest a world in which humans are positioned centrally: they
are 'surrounded' by an 'environment' (see Gold and Gujar 2002). In addition,
'environment' tends to connote those aspects of people's surrounding land-
scape that have utilitarian value (Ingold 1992). I nevertheless prefer the term to
the alternative terms 'landscape' and 'nature'. 'Landscape' has a rather distant
resonance – it suggests 'scenery' and the 'bird's-eye view' – and it tends to
connote representations of the land. 'Nature' refers either to a realm untouched
by human activity or the entire living world, including humans; neither of these
definitions is especially helpful for my analytical purposes (Whatmore 2009).
'Environment' therefore appears the most felicitous term.

Young people's relationship to the 'environment' in Bemni was indeed partly
utilitarian: the field and forest were places in which they obtained the basic food-
stuffs, fuel and other materials that would sustain them through the year. Indeed,
children and young people were crucial to the reproduction of the household
economy through the work that they did in the forest and fields. Other studies
have noted the significant role that children and youth can play in agrarian
societies, including work in Europe (Morrow 1994), Africa (Katz 2004) and
Latin America (Wyers 1986; Punch 2001). In Bemni, children and youth were
largely responsible for herding cattle in the village, and they provided vital
additional labour at peak periods in the agricultural cycle.

Children were also highly knowledgeable about the fields and forest, and,
especially, the qualities and availability of natural resources. Local knowledge
in rural communities in the global South is a well-established and prominent
topic in development studies and anthropology (for example Chambers 1983;
Gupta 1998). Many recent studies of nature and society relations draw out the

importance of how information about natural processes is acquired, communicated and stored within communities (for example Gidwani 2008; Pandian 2009). But, with notable exceptions (such as Katz 2004), the particular knowledge of children and youth has not been studied in depth. I examine in detail the nature of young people's knowledge and skills. Children in Bemni quickly acquired information about the availability of natural resources and how these resources could be harvested.

Much recent scholarship in geography, anthropology and related disciplines has challenged the common assumption that the 'environment' is interesting only from the point of its economic utility. This literature has examined subjective and affective dimensions of nature–society relations, highlighting the social construction of nature (for example Descola and Palsson 1996; Agrawal and Sivaramakrishnan 2000), the complex manner in which bodies interrelate with environments (for example Ingold 2007; McCormack 2008) and questions around affect and emotion (for example Lorimer 2012). The environment is not a static container or backdrop for human action but intimately bound up with human activity. Scholars have also argued that humans are not in any privileged position within environmental systems and that natural phenomena all have 'effects', contributing to outcomes on the ground (for example Latour 2005; Whatmore 2009).

Commentators on urban youth have in some ways anticipated this interest in how environments intermesh with people's social and cultural lives (Hart 1979; Gagen 2000). Literature on street children, for example, is full of references to young people's complex engagement with the materiality of the city, including their knowledge of the properties of 'the street' and their capacity to rework urban locations to reflect their own goals. This is evident for example in Swanson's (2009) work on young beggars in Ecuador, Andrew Burridge's (2010) work on youth protest in New York, and the anthropological research of Brad Weiss (2009) on urban youth practices in Tanzania. Young people are very much a product of their place in the urban realm, just as they shape the urban world through their practices. This literature on urban youth has also examined how young people imagine the urban neighbourhoods, towns and cities in which they live, and it has probed in rich detail the consumption practices of urban youth and their complicated relationship to new technologies such as the mobile phone (for example Pfaff 2009; Doron and Jeffrey 2012).

My work builds on this research, but through reference to young people's relationship to fields and forests rather than street corners and mobile phones. Young people's relationship to their rural surroundings is a theme of Katz's (2004) social research with children and young people in Sudan, and also Tatek Adebe's (2007) writing on youth in Ethiopia (see also Sugden and Punch 2013). My work extends these studies through focusing in more detail on precisely how young people utilise and imagine their everyday work in the field and

forest. More than existing studies, I also discuss how young people express their intimate relationship to natural resources.

I am interested in how the field and forest, and the materials and processes that children encounter in these places, are significant symbolically and socially. The agricultural fields and forest surrounding Bemni constitute the stage upon which young people develop a sense of their own gendered identities and an understanding of themselves as capable, moral subjects. Anand Pandian (2009) has advanced a parallel argument in an analysis of members of the Kallar caste in Tamil Nadu. Pandian is especially interested in the process by which Kallars – labelled a 'criminal caste' by the British – developed a notion of themselves as moral beings over the course of the twentieth century. He argues that their project of self-making occurred in large part through the manner in which they interacted with their agrarian landscape. The physical act of cultivation was centrally bound up with the wider cultivation of a virtuous self. My analysis provides similar evidence for the close connection between people's idea of themselves as virtuous and their tactile engagement with the landscape. I place particular emphasis on how young people develop a sense of self in the environment through practices of what Tim Ingold (2007) terms 'wayfaring': spontaneous movement through the landscape that entails meaning-filled, close and tactile engagement with the materials encountered there.

In addition to being important economically and for the cultivation of the self, the fields and forest are a crucially significant setting for social interaction for children and youth. The forests – like 'the street' in some urban studies – provide a venue for young people to develop intimate relationships. The forest is also a space of fun. There has been some interesting work in recent years on young people, humour and enjoyment. Oskar Verkaaik (2004) has argued that 'fun' (*mazaa*) is a key feature of the social and political lives of young people in urban settings in Pakistan. This is also a theme of Willis's research on factory labour in 1970s Britain, where 'having a laff' was important to the maintenance of friendship networks. Scholars of rural life have made similar points: James Scott (1985) frequently refers to the significance of humour in people's everyday resistance in a Malaysian village, and Katz (2004) argues that young people often blend work with different forms of play. I build on these studies by showing how the forest provides the setting and 'props' for young people to engage in games, mischief and joking. The wider point is that the forest and fields serve both as utilitarian 'resources' and as a primary site of youth sociality. It is both a 'safe space', in which to explore identities and relationships, and at other moments a place of risk.

Improvisation was also a theme that emerged in young people's discussion of everyday work. In many situations, young people in Bemni manage the demands of agricultural work or harvesting resources in the forest through a

type of judicious opportunism called *jugaad*. *Jugaad* was often used in a general way to suggest any type of improvisation that made best use of the resources that happened to be at hand. It also referred more specifically to instances in which people combined different materials in an opportunistic, and sometimes unconventional, way; *jugaad* in this sense is similar to the US term 'jimmy-rigging'. The fields and forests are sites of improvisation and provide the raw materials for acts of high-spirited *jugaad.*

The analysis of symbolic dimensions of the environment also entails considering how children and youth talk about and represent the forest and fields. The young people often sang about the beauty of the Nandakini Valley and their village, which they imagined as their 'home' (*ghar*). At a finer scale, young people associated specific sites with particular dangers and opportunities; for example, particular places were regarded as haunted or as especially treacherous sites to collect leaves. The temporal dimensions of these spatial imaginaries are sometimes complex, because young people were constantly reflecting on how their immediate surroundings were changing – seasonally and through time – and because their relationship to the fields and forest was shifting as they grew up. In addition, young people superimposed on their visions of the environment their own ideas about whether a particular place was 'safe', in the sense of being outside the supervisory gaze of their parents and older villagers, or 'risky' – a place in which they could be watched over by their elders, and therefore where it is necessary to accord with wider norms around work and gender.

South Asian approaches

My reflections on young people's agency and environmental engagements in the Himalayas have partly been inspired by a new generation of research on children and youth in south Asia. Work in the past twenty years has examined how young people are responding to processes of rapid social change, including research on higher education (for example Lukose 2005; Rogers 2008; Jeffrey 2010), youth involvement in new forms of the urban economy (Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Nisbett 2007; Gooptu 2009) and children's experiences in rural and school settings (Gold and Gujar 2002; Sarangapani 2003; Bénéï 2008). These studies have contributed to wider understanding of structures of gender difference in south Asia (for example Chopra, Osella and Osella's 2004 work on masculinities); helped us to appreciate the mismatch between young people's aspirations and economic outcomes (for example Nisbett 2007); and shown how young people's lives – and 'youth' itself – can become politicised (for example Bénéï 2008).

My book complements the existing work on children and youth in contemporary south Asia by concentrating on a set of young people who have not been