

Working Childhoods

Working Childhoods draws upon research in the Indian Himalayas to provide a theoretically informed account of children's lives in a remote part of the world. The book shows that children in their pre-teens and teens are lynchpins of the rural economy, spending hours each day herding cattle, collecting leaves and juggling household tasks with schoolwork. Through documenting in painstaking detail children's stories, songs, friendships, fears and tribulations, the book offers a powerful account of youth agency and young people's rich relationship with the natural world. The 'environment' emerges not only as a crucial economic resource but also as a basis for developing gendered ideas of self. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in better understanding childhood, youth, the environment, and development within and beyond India – including anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, development studies scholars and south Asianists.

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Working Childhoods

Youth, Agency and the Environment in India

Jane Dyson



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For Craig,
Florence and Finn

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Abbreviations

BPS	Bemni Primary School
FD	Forest Department
GC	general caste
GP	gram panchayat
JFM	joint forest management
KI	key informant
OBC	other backward class
SC	scheduled caste
SPS	Sunti Private School
SSBS	Sunti Senior Basic School
UP	Uttar Pradesh
VFJM	village forest joint management
VP	van panchayat

Preface

As I write, the central Himalayas area is struggling with the worst floods for nearly a century, a natural disaster that some have termed the ‘Himalayan tsunami’. The village featured in this book is located right in the heart of the monsoon devastation, in the Indian state of Uttarakhand. Thankfully, it sits on a mountain ridge high above the swollen rivers, and remains relatively safe. While some villagers have had property damaged and lost the livestock on which they depend, the basic infrastructure remains intact, and no human lives have been taken. Other villages have, tragically, fared much worse. The flooding is a reminder of the difficult and sometimes catastrophic events that characterise life in Uttarakhand. People in the ‘high Himalayas’ (above about 2,500 feet), and those living away from the main road network, face particularly intense struggles to maintain their farms, raise families and adapt to environmental change.

This book explores the lives of some of these people. I focus particularly on a group who have been routinely ignored in research in India: children, especially those aged between about ten and eighteen. I argue that children and youth are central to the rural economy in the high Himalayas, drawing on fifteen months of research conducted in 2003 and 2004 in a village that I call Bemni. (All names of places and people in this book are pseudonyms, with the exception of place names of larger settlements.) I examine the everyday lives of these children, which differ so hugely from those of young people in most parts of Europe or North America. Children as young as ten in Bemni spend many hours each day washing dishes, fetching water, herding cattle or collecting wood, often in forests far from home. These children are now increasingly going to school, but have to juggle their education with a range of household work. I lived and worked alongside these children, trudging up and down the mountains, lugging backloads of leaf litter or winter hay or getting blistered hands weeding fields of potatoes. We also had lots of fun. We made impromptu picnics from freshly fallen snow, foraged for wild strawberries, played games in the meadows and fooled around in the forest.

This is a fine-grained ethnography that tells a set of stories about what children in a remote part of the world were doing at a particular point in time.

Through these stories, though, the book asks a number of questions that have much broader implications for understanding the lives of young people. What do children think about their work? And what does their work tell us about children's social practices, and the ways in which life is rendered meaningful? And what do these social practices reveal about their place in, and relationship to, their environment? I pay particular attention to children of different ages and caste, and explore the social differences between boys and girls. In addressing these compelling and previously unasked questions, I offer new perspectives on young people's agency, the social meaning of work and the role of the environment in people's everyday lives.

The book will, I hope, interest those working with children and youth in any part of the world, as well as general scholars of south Asia. It speaks, too, to scholars exploring the relationship between people and their environment. It is a book that is hopeful about young people's resourcefulness but that also chronicles stories of poverty and hardship. Risks and fears, such as those elicited by the recent floods, are part of daily life.

As is often the case in academic writing, this book has been ten years in the making, and over that time I have accumulated enormous debts. The people of Bemni village have been immeasurably kind, and I am hugely grateful. On my first day in Bemni, when I explained that I was visiting several villages in my search for an appropriate field site, Saka simply laughed and said, 'Well, go and look at the other villages, but of course *this* is the best village for you.' She was right, and, just as I was that day, I am repeatedly astonished and humbled by the willingness of friends in Bemni to open their lives to me. They have so generously shared their time and knowledge, their houses and food, their hopes, sorrows and love. It is difficult to express how keenly I appreciate this privilege. In recent trips, people have rightly asked what has come out of that first period of fieldwork. I hope this book goes some way to reassuring them that there is some point to my endless wondering and questioning.

In particular, I am indebted to *tai-ji* and *tao-ji*, to Vinod, Hema, Mukesh and his wife Purnima, and to Saka, for welcoming me into their lives and their home, and for sharing the delights and cruelties of life in Bemni. I am honoured to consider them my extended family. I give heartfelt thanks to the children and young people with whom I worked for their patience, for guiding me gently into their worlds, for watching over me, for making me laugh and for only rarely complaining about my relentless pestering. Huge thanks especially go to my key informants: Ashish, Basanti, Bina, Devendre, Diraj, Janki, (the late) Papita, Parwati, Prema, Manoj, Mehendre, Rakesh, Saka, Sanjay, Sarita and their parents. I remember with fondness and gratitude the late *sarpanch-ji* for his help and support, and for being both an inspiring leader and father. I am grateful to the last three *pradhans*, and to the current *sarpanch*, for their kind permission for me to work in Bemni.

There are many others I could name – friends and neighbours, young and old – whom it has been such joy to know and who have given so much. I thank them all. I continue to work in Bemni and have been back several times since my arrival in early 2003. Now, villagers joke that it is my *mainka*, my natal home, and that there is little wonder that I still weep every time I say goodbye, just as a newlywed daughter does. I hope I will have cause to weep for several years to come.

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