Young people navigating political engagement through post-war instability and mobility: A case from rural Nepal

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A B S T R A C T

The everyday politics of rural young people who live in post-war settings in the Global South is poorly explored. In the aftermath of a recent civil war in Nepal (1996–2006), villages have been operating without elected bodies, and poorly functioning local governance has been concentrated around party patronage networks and community development. In the lives of many young people, the aspirations and practices of educational and labour mobility have been dominant. Based on fieldwork carried out in the Panchthar District, this article discusses how ordinary young people nevertheless engage in different political dimensions. Guiding the analysis through the narratives of four young men and women, I have accentuated how the tension between socio-political situatedness and young people's life strategies shapes the versatility of their political engagement. How do those who did not become political activists balance their daily lives, mobility and household obligations with involvement in party and local development politics? By exploring their motivations and engagement, I come to two conclusions. Firstly, young men navigate party politics by juggling the legacy of patronage and rejecting parties, as well as by involving themselves in disruptive events and seeking personal benefit from them. Secondly, young men and women negotiate their political motivations in community development politics primarily through household dynamics adjusted to their mobile lifestyle.

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"To an ordinary man./To a common hero, a ubiquitous character, walking in countless thousands on the streets".

[De Certeau, 1984)]

1. Introduction

Young people across the world are protesting, making revolutions and joining wars. Many researchers are studying the reasons and the patterns of violence and mobilisation (Fournier, 2015; Hoffman and Jamal, 2012; Roberts, 2015, see overview in: Jeffrey, 2013), and the recent civil war (1996–2006) in Nepal has similarly spurred research on youth becoming combatants (Hirslund, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2010; Kohrt and Maharjan, 2009; Zharkevich, 2009, 2013), para-military groups of leading parties (Hachhethu, 2009) or other types of activists (Snellinger, 2005, 2006, 2012). Yet, there is a considerable gap, especially in villages, in our understanding of the everyday politics of ordinary[1] youth. This article seeks to discuss how ordinary young people in rural post-conflict Nepal engage in politics. How do those who did not become political activists balance their daily lives, mobility and

household obligations with involvement in party and local development politics?

During my fieldwork in 2012–2014 in villages in the Panchthar District (Fig. 1), the situation could be characterised by the socio-political duality of yet another period of political "permanent transition"[2] and the growing aspirations of young people to leave. Beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, Nepal experienced alternating non-democratic periods with "democratic experiments" (Gellner and Hachhethu, 2008, 46) – the overthrow of the centuries-long oligarchic regime, a decade of multi-party democracy and 30 years of absolute monarchy. The discontent with the lack of democracy flared up with the People's Movement in 1990; later, lingering socio-economic inequalities exploded in a civil war led by Maoists. The war ended with abolition of the monarchy and promises of a constitution.[3] Meanwhile, local governance has

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[1] As opposed to the exceptional and unusual (Sandywell, 2004).

[2] Byrne and Shrestha (2014), summarising the accounts of several researchers (Baral, 1977; Gellner, 2007; Bhattarai et al., 2002), remind us that the Nepalese state has been in a condition of "permanent transition" (using Harald Wydra's concept, 2000) for a very long time.

[3] A peace process starting in 2006 aimed at the election of a Constituent Assembly and the consequent promulgation of a constitution to replace the Interim Constitution of 2007. After the two elections for the Constituent Assembly and many suspensions, the Constitution was promulgated in 2015 (after the study was made) yet was heavily criticised and opposed by different groups in Nepal, causing the escalation of a political crisis.
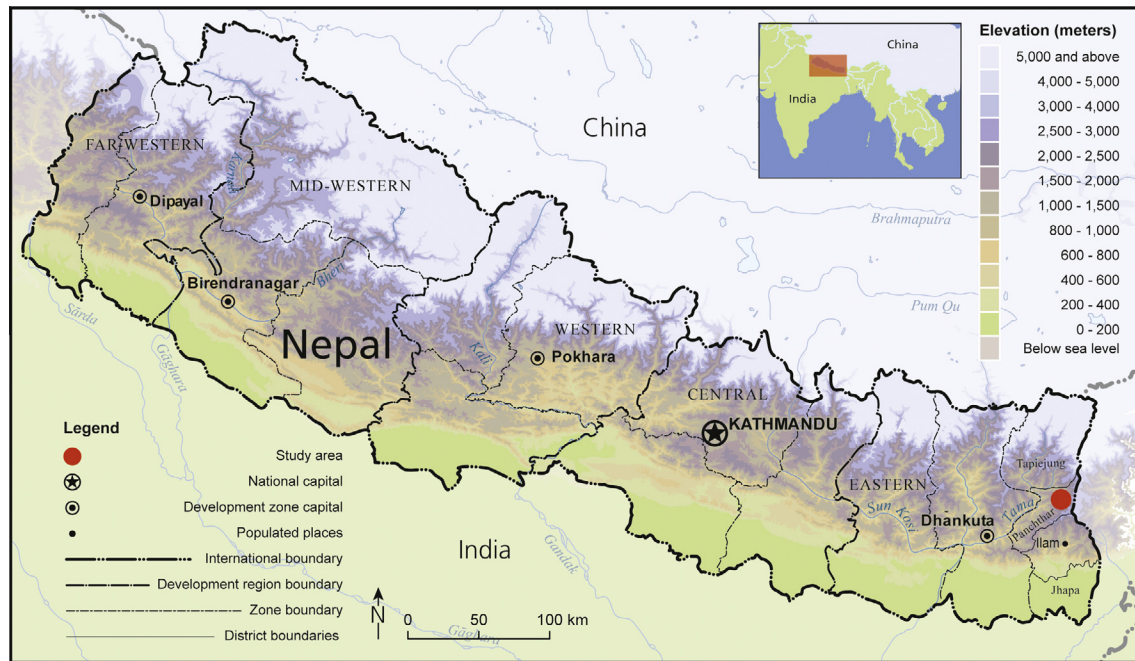
Fig. 1. Map of Nepal with my study region highlighted. This figure is adapted from a map by the United Nations: Nepal Information Platform. The original map is available here: http://un.org.np/resources/map.

lacked elected bodies since 2002 and was largely affected by interests and authority of party representatives. In the Panchthar District, as in the rest of eastern Nepal, the political context was also marked by ethnic activism and claims of a separate federal state (Bennike, 2013; Gellner, 2009; Ghai, 2011; Hangen, 2007; International Crisis Group, 2010; Lawoti, 2007). Since the 1990s and particularly during and after the war, the political crisis in Nepal has been elongated due to, among other factors, a lack of agreement on how to shift from a central to a federal state model. Federalism has been considered among the solutions to socio-economic and political inequalities. The Limbu ethnicity which is predominant in Panchthar District has been claiming a separate federal state based upon historical legacies of land ownership that defined the unique autonomy of the eastern region from the unification of Nepal in 18th century up to 1960.

In the midst of this political situatedness, young people saw the necessity of moving from the village to improve one's life. They were aspiring for social mobility through higher education that could be completed only outside their home village, or jobs in Gulf countries and Malaysia.[4]

The empirical complexity of rural Nepal adds to the wider debate on the everyday politics of young people through a focus on socio-political uncertainty and mobility that is both a necessity for and practice of many young people across the world. In the following, I examine this duality of the social and political, first by engaging in studies of young people's involvement in everyday politics in the Global South. Later, I present the methodology of my fieldwork and examine the political and social uncertainties faced by the young people in my study area. Subsequently, I analyse how young people engage in party politics and local development. I conclude that young people articulate their political motivations in two dimensions: young men navigate party politics by juggling the legacy of patronage, and young men and women negotiate their political motivations in community development politics

primarily through household dynamics adjusted to their mobile lifestyle.

2. Young people and politics in the Global South

Politics is an often unavoidable part of the everyday lives of non-activist youth if they live in settings marked by political conflicts and chaotic local governance. This section discusses how young people navigate the interrelation of the social and the political.

Everyday politics is about adapting to and progressing through the social and political setting, the process that Vigh (2006, 2009a, 2010) has described with the term "navigation" in his study on militia youth in Guinea-Bissau. Vigh has argued that young men navigate through political violence to be able to react to "the complex interaction between agents, terrain and events" (2006, 11). Like other authors (Jeffrey, 2010b; Langevang, 2008; Langevang and Gough, 2009), I contextualise this concept to emphasise the necessity of adapting to social instability. Vigh has stressed the "social situatedness" of political activities, arguing that young men were driven not by the ideas of warlords or purely economic interests but were instead motivated to search for social possibilities and social becoming. Thus, the relationship between the social and political includes not only political activities but also considerations of structural constraints, namely how young people are managing, balancing and negotiating their life strategies (see also: Esson, 2013; Langevang, 2008; Mains, 2007). This resonates with the view that it is important not to over-interpret actions of young people but to focus on how they reflect on (cf. Kallio and Häkli, 2011a, 2011b, 2013) and intend their socio-political actions (see also: Azmi et al., 2013). In this article, I refer to these various interpretations and interests in politics as political motivations.

For many young people, social situatedness is shaped by mobility that is perceived as a necessary tool and source to progress towards a better life (Jeffrey, 2010b; Mains, 2007; Punch, 2014; Vigh, 2010). Mobility is more than just movement in space; it is also "the imagined unfolding of social life" (Vigh, 2009b, 100).

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[4] In 2013/14 alone, more than half a million legal migrants left the country (not including India and illegal workers). According to estimates, labour remittances comprise 29.1% of GDP (Government of Nepal, 2014).