

# Special Theme: Youth Culture in Nepal

## YOUTH PROBLEMS: AN INTRODUCTION

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After some early forays into cultures of adolescence in the 1920s, it wasn't until the last two or three decades that academic anthropology "discovered" youth and youth culture, largely as a result of the discipline's gradual shift in focus toward complex, urban societies. Whereas all social groups have some conception of childhood out of which culturally-constituted adults eventually emerge, the phenomenon of youth as a distinct phase *between* child- and adulthood occurs only in those times and places where a degree of socio-economic complexity requires a delaying of adulthood. That youth cultures have historically been associated with elites and middle classes points to the fact that the experience of youth is a luxury to the extent that delayed adulthood is something that only relatively wealthy social classes can afford. Most often associated with formal education, youth is a period in which young people receive the training necessary to reproduce their class group's social standing and distinction. Prolonged youth also delays the age of (legitimate) sexuality thereby limiting family size and helping social groups accumulate and protect wealth. Often a poor family's survival depends on their ability to mobilize adults—as many and as early as possible. Similarly, times of sociopolitical stress may force groups to call (or literally recruit) young people into adulthood earlier and earlier. The intriguing historical and anthropological question is under what circumstances do societies (or specific groups within societies) strategically delay adulthood and when do they strategically call young people to early adulthood?

The four articles on Nepali youth and youth culture in this issue of *SINHAS* offer some fascinating answers to this question. As a group these articles present a range of social conditions from extremely delayed social adulthood to extremely shortened youth. At one end of the spectrum is Amanda Snellinger's article on youth wings within major Nepali political parties. She describes the ironic situations in which grandfathers are stuck in seemingly endless careers as "youth leaders" while they await (and

struggle for) ascendancy into the highest, and most limited, ranks of political adulthood. At the other extreme is Ina Zharkevich's article on young people's involvement in the Maoist movement. Zharkevich documents how many rural Nepali youth embraced Maoist ideology as a means to, among other things, actively claim a form of social adulthood denied them by involvement in prolonged state education and international entities attempting to impose universal (but Western-based) definitions of childhood. Groups engaged in military struggle (especially insurrectionists without state resources) rarely have the motivation—or luxury—to delay the forms of adulthood needed to take up arms even if outside (usually anti-revolutionary) interests condemn these actions in the name of child protection.

The article by Brandon Kohrt and Sujen Maharjan explores this tension in more detail by ethnographically documenting the variable, context-dependent nature of Nepali ideas of child- and adulthood. Kohrt and Maharjan question the dominant UNESCO definition of childhood as a time of innocence and incapacity that extends to the arbitrary age of eighteen. Following an ethno-psychological approach, they argue that while there is no *single* Nepali definition of adulthood, the models that do exist are much more flexible and contextual than what rigid international prescriptions can accommodate. While certainly not advocating “child soldiering,” Kohrt and Maharjan argue that we dis-serve Nepali young people in many ways by denying them the cultural agency to claim the forms of social adulthood offered them in Maoist ideology and action.

Finally, Rosalind Evans' article on youth experiences in Bhutanese Nepali refugee camps in Eastern Nepal offers a glimpse of the frontline in the struggle over youth hearts, minds, bodies, and abilities. While the United Nations and other international NGOs work to imprint the local categories of child and youth with the de-politicizing imperatives of prolonged education and delayed social agency, radical elements in the camps (seeking to invade Bhutan and reclaim lost homelands) work to politicize young people and recruit them into more adult-like responsibilities as “freedom fighters.” Camp officials struggle to confine and co-opt youth agency, indefinitely delaying adulthood in the context of a terrible shortage of adult jobs in the “legitimate” capitalist market economy. For Lhotshampa Maoists, however, there is no time like the present to mobilize youth into adult forms of responsibility.

What all of these articles illustrate is the fact that in contemporary societies, youth is a contested and problematic category. From the perspective of mainstream capitalist society (in Nepal or elsewhere) youth

is an ephemeral condition ostensibly needed to prepare young people for the demands of adult labor but serving also as a holding category in the face of a shortage of “adult” occupations. Snellinger’s account of elderly Nepali youth illustrates this market process at its extreme but the same logic delays entry into adult occupations across the middle-class labor economy. In effect capitalist economies almost always (and perhaps by definition) suffer from a *surplus of adults*. In other words, the number of recognized (legitimately “adult”) jobs that pay sustainable middle-class wages will necessarily be limited. (Otherwise there would be no basis for class differentiation.) If middle-class adulthood is contingent upon obtaining one of these scarce positions (making it possible to set up a middle-class household and achieve social reproduction), and if there are more candidates than positions, then prolonging youth (often in the form of interminable pursuit of degrees and other qualifications that promise entry into the middle class<sup>1</sup>) is an inevitable outcome. In middle-class societies youth is a holding status that serves both as a marker of class privilege (as young people undergo extensive education) and of class ambition (as lower classes embrace education as a vehicle for social mobility). It is the conflict between these two realities (of class privilege and social mobility) that makes youth the site of potential class crisis as the reservoir of educated youth (eager to advance to middle-class adulthood) threatens to breach the dikes that contain social order. Not surprisingly, Nepal’s Maoist insurrection was (in part) an expression of this contradiction (between the promises of education and the reality of social mobility) and certainly drew strength from the ideological discontent of Nepali youth. Once called into being, Nepali young people became “problem youth,” a category to contain or co-opt, to delay or advance into adulthood, to depoliticize or radicalize. These articles illustrate some of what is at stake in the struggle for youth; they are literally Nepal’s future but the question remains as to what that future will be.

## Reference

Shakya, Dipu and Shota Hatakeyama. 2008. Parentocracy, Not Meritocracy, in Basic Education of Nepal. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 13(1): 1–16.

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<sup>1</sup> As Shakya and Hatakeyama (2008) point out, educational “achievement” in Nepal (as elsewhere) is more about “parentocracy” than about meritocracy, in spite of the egalitarian pretexts of “education for all.”