
In Search of Future: Youth, aspiration and mobility in Nepal, by Andrea Kölbel

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REFERENCES

In Search of Future: Youth, aspiration and mobility in Nepal, by Andrea Kölbel. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. Education and Society in South Asia Series. 2020, 156 pages, ISBN 978-0-19-012451-9

- 1 Andrea Kölbel's book titled *In Search of Future: Youth, aspiration and mobility in Nepal* is an excellent work on how young people shape their aspiration through formal education. It skilfully brings together the literature on youth studies, education studies and future studies to provide us with an insight into how young people in Nepal are engaging with education to pursue their visions for the future. *In Search of Future* revolves around the lives of 24 young people pursuing higher education in Nepal. By locating young peoples' agency in their world of social obligations, Kölbel offers a nuanced perspective on young people's aspirations as not merely being a quest for independence but as a negotiation within their social worlds. The book's main contribution lies in critically engaging with the concept of 'capacity to aspire' (p19) and with how young people come to form their future orientations in 'uneven and often unexpected ways' (p34).
- 2 The book is divided into six chapters. The first two chapters situate educated youth in Nepal within broader theoretical literature on youth studies and within various transformations in education in the history of Nepal. It is also very prolific in using both the idea of 'vital conjunctures' (p15) in the lives of young people and the ways in which these serve 'crucial periods in people's lives which can have multiple outcomes' (p17). The three empirical chapters elaborate on this idea through a detailed analysis of the educational journey of students on Patan Multiple Campus. Kölbel clearly draws on

the time she spent with these young people, the friendship she built with them and their discussions about future plans. She positions this within the complicated context of higher education in Nepal, especially in the various ways in which young people try to acquire the skills, knowledge and certifications required for the future they envisage for themselves. In all the chapters, she includes painstaking details – for example, about the limited number of seats allocated in the science department by the student union (p82), about a discussion on the future of student canteens (p88) and about how male students crisscross the city on their motorbikes (p96) –, therefore providing unique details about the lives of young people and about the way they spend their time. In doing so, Kölbel has expertly captured how many life decisions are taken in spaces that are situated outside formal spaces of the university. This is all brought together in the final chapter that questions the politics of realising one's aspirations.

- 3 The chapters also strike a beautiful balance between the details provided about young people's lives and the way in which they are positioned within the Nepalese context of transformations in education. These broader social political environments are presented not only as a background context but as being central to the life decisions made by students. Nepal's rapidly changing educational context has led to fundamental shifts in the training and employment opportunities available to students. The chapters contextualise young people's life stories within the particular details of their individual social context. Jeevan's reluctance to become *abara yuba* (vagabond youth) (p101), Anandi's regret at not pursuing the 'difficult' degree in economics (p85) and Ranjan's hope of setting himself up as a development expert (p108) – all show how their lives are deeply interconnected with collective future visions. These detailed empirical cases enable Kölbel to make a very persuasive argument about how individual agency is embedded in its social context.
- 4 Though the book provides nuanced insight into the lives of 'ordinary' students (p56), it left me wanting to understand a little more about how young people resolve conflicts and contradictions in their lives, especially when there are 'pressures and recursive interventions by adults' (p15). Similarly, the epilogue lists the career trajectory of young people, with most of them seemingly settled in middle-class jobs and three of them now living abroad. Given the centrality of migration for educational purposes in young people's future imaginations (Chapter 5), these cases could have been utilised effectively to engage fully with the idea of both spatial and social mobility. Though the book attempts to bring together concepts such as agency, mobility and future orientations, it does not, however, address these concepts in relation to each other. It thus feels like a missed opportunity of drawing on well-established scholarship on mobility and of contributing to the emerging literature on upcoming studies. Nonetheless, the book is an excellent example of how diverse life stories can be brought together and analysed in conjunction with broader social and political changes. *In Search of Future* is an important contribution to the disciplines of human geography, area studies, education and migration.

AUTHORS

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Uma Pradhan is lecturer at University College London, United Kingdom. Uma's research explores the larger processes of state-society interaction in the production of education. Her research has been published in journals such as *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, *Globalisation, Societies, and Education*, *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*.