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THE BECOMING: YOUNG WORKING-CLASS MASCULINITIES IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Across Nepal, large numbers of adolescent boys and young men leave their rural homes to find work and live out their dreams in the burgeoning metropolis of Kathmandu, the nation's capital. In this challenging transition, they have to navigate their emerging identities as independent young men—as brothers, sons, fathers, husbands and wage earners in the construction economy. In this visual essay of 15 photographs, artist Daisy Yang and anthropologist Mark Turin explore questions of migration, mobility, labour and kinship by engaging with the harsh reality of working-class masculinities in contemporary Nepal.

KEYWORDS

Nepal; Class; Masculinities; Gender; Migration; Labour

Bio

Mark Turin is an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia cross-appointed between the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies and the Department of Anthropology. Mark directs the Digital Himalaya Project which he co-founded in 2000 as a platform to make multi-media resources from the Himalayan region widely available online. For over twenty years, Mark's regional focus has been the Himalayan region (particularly Nepal, northern India and Bhutan), and more recently, the Canadian Pacific Northwest. Mark writes about language reclamation, revitalization, documentation and conservation; language mapping, policies, politics and language rights; orality, archives, digital tools and technology.

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Daisy Yang is a Taiwanese Canadian artist currently based in BC, Canada. After studying in Magnum Foundation and NYU's Human Rights and Photography program in 2012 under the guidance of Susan Meiselas and Fred Ritchin, Daisy has devoted her time to understanding and documenting social issues, with a focus on migration, gender and identity formation. Her experience growing up in both Taiwan and Canada have helped her to approach sensitive stories with cultural nuance.

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Situating the Project

This photo-essay is part of an ongoing conversation between a photographer and an anthropologist, both of whom have long-term, collaborative research partnerships with communities in Nepal. The essay emerges from a shared commitment to documenting the lives and livelihoods of marginalized communities and challenging Orientalist imaginings of places like Nepal. As such, we situate our work within the dual frames of critical visual anthropology (Pink 2003) and post-colonial studies (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 2006). At the same time, we recognise that Nepal exists in a complex state of non-post-coloniality as it has never in its history been occupied by an external power leading to a unique self-identity within South Asia (Des Chene 2007).

Between 2014 and 2018, photographer Daisy Yang spent 12 months documenting the experiences of Nepali adolescent boys and young men who leave their rural village homes and travel to Kathmandu, the country's capital, to work in construction. As part of her artistic and collaborative process, Yang built extensive rapport with these young men, through which she was invited to photograph aspects of their lives, documenting the highs and lows of everyday existence in this densely-packed and socially-stratified city. These individual stories of young men working in construction offer insights into the social construction of masculinity which we hope may lead to a more balanced understanding of the role of gender in Nepal. Our contribution offers cultural framing rather than analysis and argument. We situate Yang's visual documentation within the specific context of Nepal's ongoing de-agriculturalization and long history of migration, and the wider setting of what has been termed the 'revolution of rising expectations' (Obershall 1969).

The selection of photographs of Yang's research partners and participants shared in this essay—all between the ages of 14 and 24—record with a tender intimacy the daily routines of labourers and construction workers building Nepal's fast-modernizing capital. Their own personal growth and emerging adulthood mirrors the growth of the city around them. Through their labour, they are contributing to their own development and to that of the metropolis.

Constructing Nepal

The construction industry of Nepal is shaped by "dynamics of migration and exploitation" (Hirslund 2021: 2, also Sharma 2016). According to recent estimates, Nepal's booming construction sector sustains—and is sustained by—a 2.5 million-strong workforce. Despite this enormous economic and social footprint, the sector can be characterized as unorganized, lacking in social protections and exhibiting high levels of informality, which in turn contribute to the creation of a chaotic and competitive workspace (Hirslund 2021: 1). Nepal's relatively low level of industrialization—certainly when compared with its neighbours China and India, to the north and south respectively—and significant rural to urban seasonal migration, create the preconditions for prolonged rural distress (Hirslund 2021: 2).

In Nepal's history and present, Sharma identifies what he calls a deep "culture of migration" (2018: 53) that has shaped (and continues to shape) livelihood choices across Nepal. Various forms of migration—including domestic seasonal migration, cross-border migration with India and international migration which forms a substantial part of the remittance economy—have long been significant features of household financial strategies, although the destinations and specifics have changed over time. The intergenerational impact of this movement and mobility shapes both the gender identities of those who move and those who remain (Sharma 2018: 53).

According to Nepal's 15th Five Year Periodic Plan developed by the National Planning Commission, women's labour force participation stands at 26.3 percent which is almost half of that of men at 53.8 percent (Nepali 2020). Most of the construction workers operating in Nepal's informal economy are men. Noting the "deep patriarchal structures of Nepali society, in particular along the southern Hindu belt from where most of the migrant construction workers hail", Hirslund documents the "masculinization of construction work", reporting that many of his male interlocutors expressed the sentiment that women were not well positioned to develop the "complicated skill-set associated with construction expertise" (2021: 7). While such a traditional and demarcated gender-based division of labour is not unusual in the context of South Asia, the last several decades have seen important changes in Nepal in terms of women's participation in workspaces beyond the domestic and mostly agricultural sphere of the family home.

During the protracted armed conflict that took place in Nepal between the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) and the Government of Nepal between 1996 and 2006, as young men left to join the Maoists or state forces (or simply fled the situation), observers reported women to be “ploughing fields, running forestry groups, and administering schools and other institutions” (Pettigrew and Shneiderman 2004: 25) in a marked departure to the social norms before the conflict. On a related note, following Nepal’s catastrophic 2015 earthquakes that claimed close to 9,000 lives, destroyed more than half a million homes, and left hundreds of thousands of people homeless, the National Reconstruction Authority hired 149 women masons—20 percent of the total mobile masons recruited—to help rebuild homes and offices. Disaster Risk Management Analyst Sulochana Nepali describes this as “an unprecedented feat considering that masonry, and the construction sector, have conventionally been male-dominated until recently”, adding that the “gender gap is even higher in masonry and other construction sub-sectors such as carpentry, plumbing, electricians, among others. Sociocultural norms are the main reason why women are not easily accepted in male-dominated occupations” (2020). These recent examples illustrate why it is necessary to engage with theories and practices of masculinity in order to understand young Nepali men’s choices to seek employment in the construction sector.

Understanding Masculinities in Nepal

We situate our contribution within the well-established anthropological literature on masculinities in Nepal (Maycock 2017, 2019; Sharma 2007, 2008, 2016 and 2018). Scholarship on Nepali masculinities is particularly timely because research on gender has historically focussed exclusively on women to the neglect of exploring important issues such as male labour migration through a gender-based lens (Sharma 2018: 9). More recent studies effectively demonstrate “that migration and emigration are important aspects of masculinity” (Maycock 2017: 181). While we acknowledge that masculinity is—or more properly, *masculinities are*—multiple, variable, contested and contingent (Maycock 2019: 3), we also find value in examining Raewyn Connell’s concept of hegemonic masculinity within the context of Nepal. For Connell (2005: 77), hegemonic masculinity can be understood as “one form of masculinity ... that is culturally exalted” which may be “...defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy” (as cited in Maycock 2019: 4). The coercive power of hegemonic masculinities, as documented by Cornwall and Lindisfarne, is that they “define successful ways of ‘being a man’” and in so doing, “define other masculine styles as inadequate or inferior” (1994: 3).

Such a framing is particularly relevant in a predominantly caste-based society like Nepal, where strong social injunctions and preferences exist regarding different forms of labour. Masculinity does not simply exist, it is performed, and performances of masculinity “serve to validate the masculine subject’s sense of himself as male/boy/man” (Liebrand and Udas 2017: 120). Maycock introduces the concept of “Brahmanic masculinity” as a form of hegemonic masculinity” (2019: 6) which invites a more complex reading than might first appear. In Nepal, and across other parts of Hindu South Asia, high-caste Brahman communities often value a particular strain of ascetic Hinduism which has as its ideological basis a focus on ritual purity, educational and scholastic achievement and an aversion to physical and manual labour. In some contexts, this combination of characteristics is perceived as ‘feminized’ by other ethnic and caste groups. As Ahearn (2001) shows, what makes this perceived feminization of Brahman boys so powerful is that it does not in and of itself subvert or in any way challenge their high-caste status. In fact, in our analysis, it only serves to reinforce the authority and privilege of high-caste men. The result is that young men from less dominant castes and from historically marginalized communities—like those documented in Yang’s photographic study—are left to negotiate their masculinities filtered through the lens of a caste system in which their physical labour situates them lower in the social hierarchy.

Masculinities are not only culturally instantiated, they are also embodied, with young men’s bodies serving as primary sites for the enactment of dominant ideologies about gender. Moore asks us to recall that the body is as much shaped and experienced by gender as gender itself shapes and structures bodily experience (2007: 8), and any analysis of masculinity and mobility must explore questions of agency. In his ethnography of young Nepali migrants, Sharma documents diverse motivations shaped by much more than simple calculations of rational economic self-interest (2018: 5). These young Nepali migrants are as busy “making their own sociocultural worlds” as they are making money (Sharma 2018: 6). In a

related vein, although through a visual rather than textual medium, Yang's photographic reportage also demonstrates how the young construction workers whose challenging lives she has had the privilege to record are also busy crafting their own sociocultural worlds, through stories, song, laughter and family.

Outro: Resonance and Strength

Read together, the images and narratives that constitute this project explore the influence of patriarchy on young Nepali men at a key moment in their emotional and social development, and as they begin to participate in the capitalist wage economy as individual and independent labourers. The social expectations of performative forms of assertive masculinity are made legible through these images, many of which surface a tenderness and vulnerability in these young men. At the same time, many adolescents in Nepal suffer in silence, both complying with and struggling against social norms about what it means to be or to become "masculine". Yang's images illustrate the creative ways that young men conform to and at the same time resist social and cultural expectations. Through this project, we hope—albeit in a very modest way—to explore questions of structural and gender-based violence, which—when left unrecognized—reproduce and seep into other aspects of society, creating cyclical patterns of oppression and abuse (see Kohrt and Worthman 2009, Paudel 2007).

At its heart, our goal is to recognize and uplift these young men who find themselves negotiating complex pressures—internal and external—to comply with stereotypical and often hegemonic expectations of masculinity. Both proud of their new independence and their ability to provide for their families, and at the same time acutely aware of their vulnerability and reliance on (and commitment to) the many women in their lives, this photo-essay invites the reader to pause and reflect for a moment on the emotional complexity of adulthood.

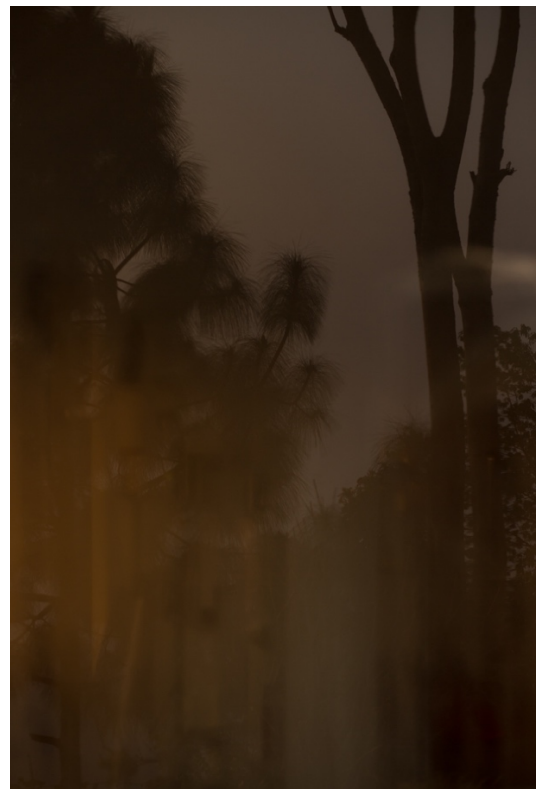


PHOTO 1: During the winter dry season, farming households in Nepal slow down their agricultural activity. Boys, relieved from their farm chores, become available for other work and many seek opportunities to earn extra income. Many travel to the capital city, Kathmandu, where construction work is widely available. Some know whom to contact before they arrive thanks to recommendations from friends, family members, or local contractors, others start job hunting on foot when they reach Kathmandu.



PHOTO 2: Prior to 2006, multi-storey buildings were restricted in Kathmandu. More than a decade later, the city has become a concrete jungle. Boys and young men from all over the country descend upon Kathmandu every autumn where they work as unskilled labourers build high-rise apartment building for more affluent city dwellers. This is a luxury condominium owned by wealthy Nepalis, for some it is even a second home. Many such multi-storey blocks in the Kathmandu Valley sit half empty as supply outstrips demand.



PHOTO 3: The young men I met during my project came mostly from the hills and plains of Nepal. The working age in construction is 17, which in most cases is confirmed only verbally. Through the interview process, I learned that some boys are actually younger than they state in order to secure work. The younger ones act as tough as they can in order to pass off as 17. Most of the young men whose lives I have documented in this story didn't graduate high school. Some didn't know how to write their names.



PHOTO 4: Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, is a landlocked city situated in a basin. It is also fast expanding. A forest on the outskirts of the city is being cleared to make way for new buildings.



PHOTO 5: Construction sites are locations where workers from all over the country from different ethnic communities meet and share stories of their lives and hometowns after work, from early evening into the night. Younger boys are often bewildered by the stories told by older men as they huddle around an open fire fuelled by scraps from construction, including toxic plastic.



PHOTO 6: Carrying heavy loads and shovelling dirty are ‘entry-level’ jobs, for which no technical skills are required. The young men compete with one another to carry the heaviest possible load. Here, Dil, aged 19, shovels dirt in preparation for the construction of a new home that will replace a hundred-year-old residential building in Patan that was badly damaged by the 2015 earthquake.



PHOTO 7: Some of the money earned goes to food, mobile phones and calling plans, hairstyles and fashion. The rest is sent home. The boys are keen to be seen wearing fashionable Western clothes and often dye their hair to make a statement. They also like to pose and take photographs with motorcycles they see in the streets. Dil has a bittersweet relationship with Kathmandu. He is both excited for the opportunities and different worldviews it provides, but struggles with loneliness, noise and pollution.



PHOTO 8: According to the young men I spoke with, working in construction can be boring and repetitive. Bricklaying, although tedious, can be satisfying as it involves learning a vocational skill. Despite the sense of accomplishment and the opportunity to learn new skills, very few of the adolescent boys and young men stick with a specific job for very long. They are constantly on the move, bargaining and leveraging various opportunities. Many also use this opportunity to travel and experience first-hand the diversity of the country.



PHOTO 9: There are no fixed working hours in Kathmandu's construction sites. Sometimes labourers have to stay up to work in the middle of the night because of city regulations about the use of heavy machines.



PHOTO 10: When asked about their future, most of these young labourers speak of uncertainty. They have no sense of where or what they will be in three, five or ten years. Most of them don't imagine that it becoming a resident of Kathmandu is within reach: "It's too expensive, and there's just no way, it's not even worth thinking about". In this picture, Tika Ram, aged 17, reflects on his family while huddling around a small fire for warmth before going to bed.



PHOTO 11: The friendships among adolescent boys from different backgrounds is strong but also fleeting. They rely on each other's company during work, but these bonds can break as quickly as they are formed. Boys often move on within days or weeks, leaving their companions behind with little notice. Some even use fake names and many have multiple phone numbers. These are all strategies for self-protection in a climate of considerable uncertainty and risk.



PHOTO 12: A portion of each pay check is usually withheld by the contractor to ensure labourers honour their contract and finish the job. In the face of such uncertainty, these young men working in construction often move on to other opportunities with little advance notice, forsaking the last instalment of their compensation altogether. Manoj, aged 17, rests on a bed after a long day of work with 13 other labourers, all originally from the district of Dang.

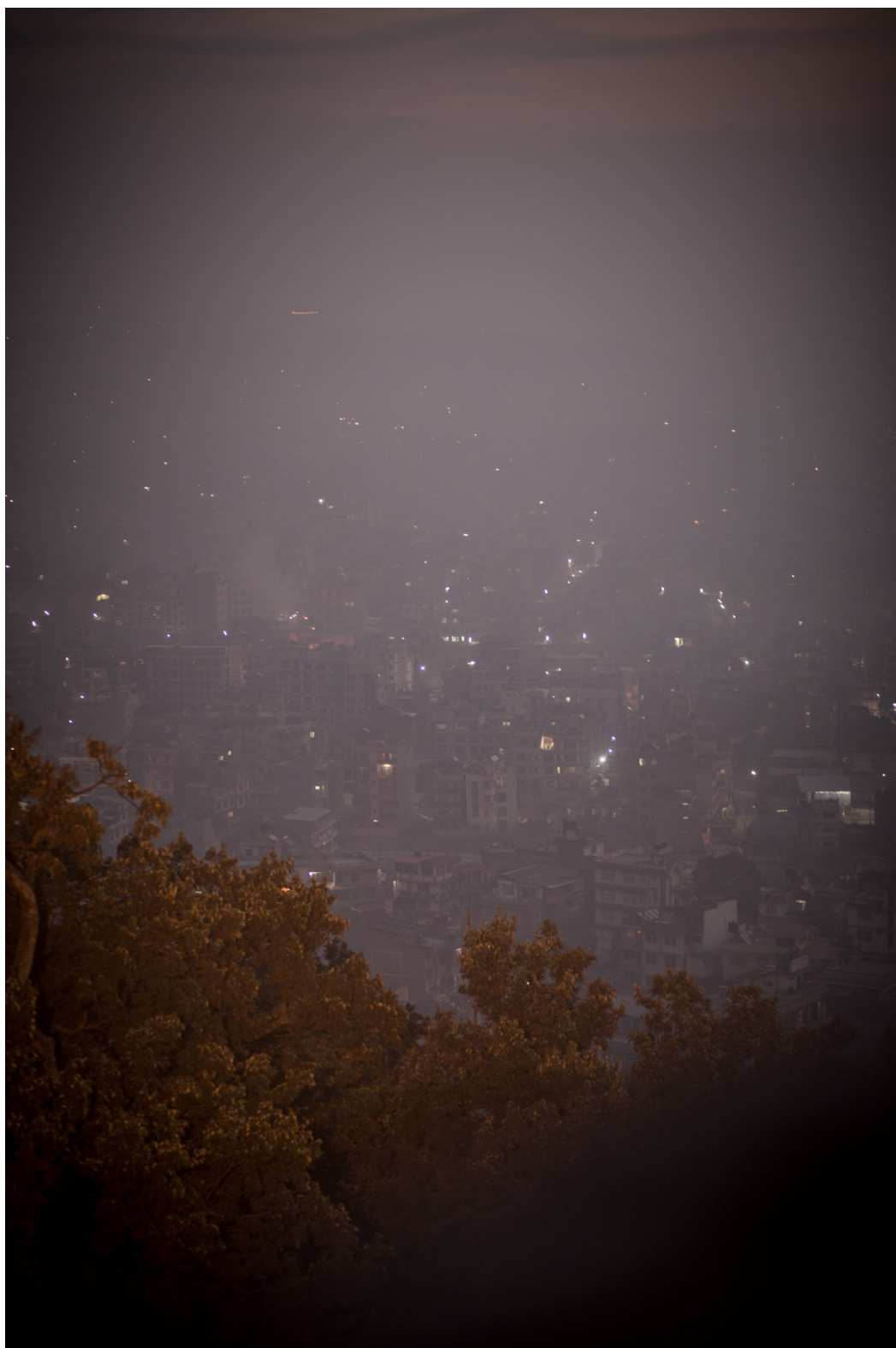


PHOTO 13: An early morning view of Kathmandu through the haze.



PHOTO 14: Bikash, 21, his wife Kamala and their two children: a 2/1/2-year-old son and a daughter of only 6 months. They are sitting in a room in Taiba, a small town on the outskirts of Kathmandu. Bikash and Kamala have been married for 6 years. Bikash works as a gravel mover with his young contractor and friend, Sanu, 17. The small family struggle to make ends meet and are constantly moving. Kamala plans to return to carrying bricks to help with the family income when her daughter is older.



PHOTO 15: Adolescent boys come and go. While some return home and will never come to Kathmandu to work again, most continue in their quest to find the best possible opportunity in the city, striving to provide for themselves and for their families back home.

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