



# Parents, permission, and possibility: Young women, college, and imagined futures in Gujarat, India



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## ABSTRACT

This article advances critical geographies of youth through examining the spatiality implicit in the imagined futures of young women in rural India. Geographers and other scholars of youth have begun to pay more attention to the interplay between young people's past, present, and imagined futures. Within this emerging body of scholarship the role of the family and peer group in influencing young people's orientations toward the future remain underexamined. Drawing on eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork, my research focuses on a first generation of college-going young women from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds in India's westernmost state of Gujarat. I draw on the "possible selves" theoretical construct in order to deploy a flexible conceptual framework that links imagined post-educational trajectories with motivation to act in the present. In tracing the physical movement of these young women as they navigate and complete college, my analysis highlights the ways in which particular kinds of spaces and spatial arrangements facilitate and limit *intra-* and *inter-*generational contact, and the extent to which this affects young women's conceptions of the future. I conclude by considering the wider implications of my research for ongoing debates surrounding youth transitions, relational geographies of age, and education in the Global South.

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## 1. Introduction: hidden talents

Avinashi Chaudhury<sup>1</sup> is in her early twenties and currently lives in a women's student hostel in Ahmedabad city, Gujarat, where she is a finalist studying for a B.Com degree at a government college. Despite having an elder sibling, she is the first in her family to enrol in higher education. Her migration 280 km away to study in the city was her first prolonged period away from her Scheduled Tribe (ST)<sup>2</sup> family back in Kota, a medium-sized village in the Gujarati district of Navsari. Avinashi's situation is reflective of a broader trend in Kota in recent years whereby poorer but upwardly mobile OBC, SC, and ST communities have increasingly been investing in the education of their children, especially their daughters.

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<sup>1</sup> In this article all informant and place names have been anonymized.

<sup>2</sup> The Constitution of India outlines four classifications in implementing policies of affirmative action. Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) are indigenous peoples in India considered to be the lowest socioeconomically ranking groups. Other Backward Classes (OBC) are considered socially and educationally disadvantaged. OBCs, SCs, and STs in contemporary India receive quotas in public sector employment and higher education institutions. By contrast Forward Castes are considered socially, educationally, and economically advanced. For a succinct overview of caste in contemporary India, and its relation to politics and the economy, see [Corbridge et al. \(2012\)](#).

We first met in mid-2014 after my arrival at the home of a host family in Kota, where I was conducting doctoral research on the nature of social and generational transformations occurring in rural India. Living in a neighboring home, Avinashi had returned from college for the Hindu festival of Diwali. Over the course of her three-week vacation our conversations were scarce and impersonal; stringent gendered norms in line with familial and societal expectations meant that she was mostly confined to the immediacy of our housing cluster. She became particularly reticent during group conversations that included her parents, often relegating herself to the shadows and avoiding any direct eye contact. It was only when we later began to meet up in Ahmedabad that conversations became much freer. One Wednesday afternoon, after a few months had passed, we were sat in the dusty canteen on her college campus. We were joined by three of her female friends including Meena, an only daughter to an SC family also from Kota. Avinashi stared frustratingly at the surface of her hot chai, before turning to me and picking up on a recurring topic of conversation<sup>3</sup>:

<sup>3</sup> *Italics* indicate a verbatim account. In the case of transliterations, these have been included in parentheses immediately following the relevant word/phrase. Square brackets indicate editing for anonymity or clarification.

"In India if you are a man.. then every man will get a job and earn money. That's it. Nobody will tell them not to. For us, what is it like? We must seek *permission* from our families if we want to work in the future, after our degree. When we marry, there are problems in *married life* and so we will have to throw away our jobs. Men will work in the *police, engineering lines, banks*, but women will not work. That's how it is after *college* –"

"– so whatever *talent* us girls have," interjected Meena, "it does not come out (*bahāra ni nikalatum*)"

This article examines the imagined futures of college-going female youth in rural Gujarat, India. Formal schooling constitutes a significant driver in the ambitions of young people and their parents, and is an important aspect of globalization (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004). Yet, despite a growing scholarly focus on higher education in India and increasing female enrolment in Indian undergraduate colleges (World Bank, 2016: 104) there is a dearth of research examining the lived experiences of young women themselves (Deuchar, 2014: 144, but see Krishnan, 2016; Lukose, 2009). This is significant given the multiple forms of subordination faced by young women, especially those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as they navigate formal education. Salient norms around gender shape parental decision-making; in addition to key considerations around economic investment, marriage alliances, and the associated "opportunity costs" (that is, the sacrifice of unpaid domestic labour) (Mukhopadhyay and Seymour, 1994), education is often imagined as a basis for consolidating feminine accomplishments and "improving their capacity to be effective mothers, wives, and household workers" (Dyson, 2014: 58). Notwithstanding these observations, the perspectives of young women themselves rarely form the centre of analysis in studies of youth and higher education in India. This article seeks to address this deficit, tracing the ways in which young women's pursuit of a college education, and the subsequent temporary migration away from their natal context, influences their orientation toward the future. Rather than focusing intimately on a type of classroom ethnography, I aim to develop a spatial theorization of a social-scientific strand of scholarship on youth transitions concerning young people's imagined futures.

Over the course of eleven months I traced the everyday lives of young people and their families from Kota, living with families among the village community and conducting participant observation, and semi- and un-structured interviews. I encountered numerous young women like Avinashi and Meena from marginalized backgrounds. Conversations would often turn into heated discussions surrounding personal anxieties regarding the gendered nature of post-educational employment and marriage. What emerged powerfully throughout my research were informants' varied conceptions of the future; the type of salaried work they would like to obtain, the possibility of continued education, migration to the city, and hopes for personal relationships and marriage. This was paired with a distinct appreciation for the sociocultural and generational realities that served to both enable and constrain their future pathways. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in Gujarat state across 2014 and 2015, my analysis directs attention to the ways in which particular kinds of spaces and spatial arrangements facilitate and limit gendered and generational contact, and the extent to which this affects young women's motivational capacity to pursue certain conceptions of the future. My central argument is that, whilst educational migration to college exposes rural young women to potential occupational pathways and post-educational trajectories, young women's internalized perceptions of parental support toward their post-educational transitions to work defines the extent to which they are motivated to specify and pursue specific post-educational trajectories. In developing this argument

I engage critically with scholarship on youth transitions and imagined futures, and relational geographies of age. My analysis focuses on young women from socioeconomically marginalized OBC, SC, and ST families.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, I locate this study within relevant theoretical work on youth. After outlining the context and methodological approach toward my research, the fourth and fifth sections consider the role of friendships cultivated during college in providing new social and spatial experiences and the extent to which these influence young women's conceptions of the future. I examine the socially differentiated nature and extent of family support as perceived by young women, relating this to the perspectives of parents themselves. In the conclusion I consider the wider implications of my research on the gendered realities of young women's education, reflecting on the merits of affording space greater conceptual attention within imagined futures scholarship in order to widen the scope of empirical and theoretical enquiry into youth transitions.

## 2. Theorizing youth: transitions, futurity, and space

Scholars working within the social sciences have built up a large body of research around children, young people and the life course (e.g. Butcher and Wilton, 2008; Wyn and Woodman, 2006; Hopkins, 2006; Valentine, 2003). The concept of "youth transitions" has been problematized for its implication of a linear progression through the life-course toward independence and adulthood. Instead, studies point to the fragmented, complex, and contested nature of these transitions<sup>4</sup> (see Wyn et al., 2011), the complexities of which have been in part attributed to changes in education, family structures, and the labour market (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). Recent years have seen a particular growth of research on youth in the Global South, for example in Asia (Jeffrey, 2010; Morrow, 2013), Africa (Porter et al., 2010; Chant, 2009), and Latin America (Punch, 2014; Crivello, 2011). This perhaps reflects a much broader concern for the ways in which modern ideals of "youth" and "childhood" that became hegemonic in the West over the past century are being exported to non-Western contexts "in which resources to adequately reproduce these forms are sadly lacking" (Ruddick, 2003: 334). Accordingly, several studies have questioned the assumption that "adulthood" as a social status can be achieved for some young people at all (e.g. Ralph, 2008; Hansen, 2005), demonstrating the difficulties experienced by young people in obtaining the "social goods" traditionally associated with adulthood such as marriage and family formation, housing, and secure salaried work (Berlin et al., 2010).

An emerging area of enquiry within the youth transitions literature focuses on young people's imagined futures (e.g. Boyden, 2013; Crivello, 2011; Vigh, 2009). Hardgrove et al. (2015a) identify two key themes of imagined futures literature. One strand highlights the links between young people's imagined futures and their structural positioning within society (e.g. Vigh, 2009; Christiansen et al., 2006). Vigh (2009), in his research with Guinea-Bissau youth, describes a "global awareness from below" (2009: 93) whereby young people imagine themselves in relation to spaces and social options with varying levels of access. Focusing on would-be migrants in Guinea-Bissau and illegal migrants in Lisbon, his work signals the link between social context and imaginaries, and individual motivations and trajectories. A second strand centres around observations on the internalized sociocultural values young people hold as they break from the lived experiences and

<sup>4</sup> Following scholars of youth elsewhere (e.g. Punch, 2014; MacDonald and Marsh, 2005), I acknowledge its criticisms yet agree on the benefits of the term "transition" as a holistic notion for examining key changes among young people in social spheres of education, family, and work.

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