EDUCATIONAL ASPIRATIONS AND CHOICES IN A CHANGING SOCIETY: A STUDY OF SIKKIMESE YOUTH IN A SENIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL AND COLLEGE.

Thesis submitted to Jawaharlal Nehru University
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Declaration

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I, Sona Rai, declare that this thesis entitled, *Educational Aspirations and Choices in a Changing Society: A Study of Sikkimese Youth in a Senior Secondary School and College*, submitted by me in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Jawaharlal Nehru University, is my bonafide work. I further declare that this thesis has not been submitted for any other degree of this or any other University.

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Certificate

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CHAPTER ONE
Introduction

"Sometimes, on hot and sunny afternoons, all I can hear here are the sounds of insects. Except for a few teachers and students going about their classes, the place becomes nearly empty," stated Aditya, a young teacher at the government college, one of the two main sites of the present study. Aditya was describing what he perceived to be an academically "uninspiring" environment of the college. In the school (the other site of the study), similar narratives of despondency regarding the academic culture were articulated by some teachers. Teachers, whom I spoke to, generally held low expectations of their students, were unhappy about the lack of infrastructure, and a few felt that they were faced with unsurmountable challenge of making education happen. During the preliminary fieldwork too, while in conversation with educationists, administrators, retired teachers and journalists, a major concern was about the poor quality of state sponsored education in Sikkim. It was even said to be "hopeless", in the words of one retired administrator cum teacher.

Amidst the disillusionment, dotting the winding, mountain roads of Sikkim were the frequent sightings of students in school uniforms, of various age groups, laughing and joking with each other, waving at the vehicles passing them by, nonchalantly making their way towards school or home. This led to a broad question that motivated the present study: what were these young people thinking? More specifically, what happened to students who went to the government schools and colleges, especially those located in the rural areas? What were their experiences of school and higher education? How did they perceive education? What kind of future pathways were they planning?

As elsewhere, in Sikkim too, there are varied educational experiences based on one's social location. Within Sikkim, who belongs to the margins of education is primarily decided by one's geographical location, socio-economic background, and schooling choices. Students from rural areas, low-income families and government institutions do face several challenges when it comes to accessing quality education. This study was, thus, conceptualized as an ethnographic exploration of students' aspirations, choices, and experiences in two government institutions, a senior secondary school, and a degree college, located in rural Sikkim.

This chapter, first, locates the study within the larger conceptual framework of youth, rurality, marginality, and educational inequality. Then it delves into the conceptualization of young people's aspirations in the context of uncertainty and ambiguity brought about by the

neoliberal shift of the economic structure. This will help provide the approach to understand the aspirations, educational experiences, and lives of the young people included in the study. This will be followed by a brief overview of the changing socio-historical context of Sikkim, especially with respect to education and employment.

Youth and Education in the Changing Rural Landscape

The liberal ideological emphasis on meritocracy renders education as a vehicle of upward social mobility for all. However, this notion has faced a severe backlash from the critical perspectives in sociology of education since the 1970s. With the critical turn in educational theory, especially with the development of social reproduction approach (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977), education, by facilitating the social reproduction of privilege and marginality, has been seen as perpetuating social (class) inequality rather than help diminish it. In India, several ethnographic studies have illustrated the same (see Chopra and Jeffery, 2005; Jeffrey et al., 2008; Jeffrey, 2010). For many, pathways through formal education does not necessarily lead to secure employment or upward social mobility.

Education in India is marked by various forms of inequality. Velaskar (2013) writes about "the mythology of education as the great equalizer" (p. 428). She calls "mass inclusion" in education as an "incredibly weak and highly discriminatory inclusion" (p. 443). She further argues that there is a "hierarchical stratification of the educational structure" that corresponds to caste-class hierarchy prevalent in the larger society:

> All the various classes have or attempt to have schools worthy of their socio-economic status…. The hierarchy may vary regionally in form and shape, depending on the general development of state or region, but there is hierarchy nonetheless in the organization of the system, if not in social treatment within. (p. 413-414)

Ramachandran (2016) similarly writes about the "hierarchies of access" wherein "India has created parallel structures of education governed by different norms and playing by different rules" (p. 91). At the surface, there is a dominant notion that mass participation of young people from all sections of Indian society yields similar benefits. That is often not the reality. Upadhya (2016) looking at young people and their families in Coastal Andhra Pradesh points out that the "deep value" (p. 1) in engineering degrees has dominated the public imagination as these degrees are understood to be the harbinger of lucrative jobs in the IT industry, in India and abroad, thereby leading to "social mobility, success, and social prestige" (p. 11). Instead, she found that increased participation in the pursuit of engineering degrees (further facilitated by the state by providing fee reimbursement schemes to students

from the "backward" class and caste groups) led to devaluation of these degrees and limiting of social mobility for those from the marginalized sections. The deeply entrenched inequalities characteristic of Indian society, despite the introduction of "inclusive" policies by the state, results in rather contradictory outcomes for those most in need of empowerment through education.

In addition to the hierarchies of caste, class, and gender, that of location, between the urban and the rural, is another important dimension of inequality of education in India. Rural areas, in general, are characterized by poverty, geographical isolation, inadequate educational and work opportunities (Punch, 2002). The way in which modern "development" process has prioritized urban areas places the rural at the failing end. Kelly, (2009, p. 2) describes rural areas as "places of great loss – of people, natural resource, and often, as a result, any vision of long term viability." The subordination of the rural to the urban is often justified, again, through the "metrocentric" discourse of "success" (Corbett, 2009; Campbell and Yates, 2011; Farrugia, 2014). This metrocentric discourse relies on the (neo)liberal ideological understanding that views migration to urban areas as a necessity for people to achieve "success" in life as they provide the various means to fulfill educational, occupational, and other aspirations that people are believed to hold.

Gupta (2005), writing about the increasing trend of rural population to migrate to cities and bigger towns for better opportunities, states that rural areas in India are suffering from what he calls "hopeless disenchantment" (p. 752). Vasavi (2019: p. 32) describes rural India "as being constituted by the triangulated structures of reproduced caste, an economics of neglect, and a politics of rescue." The "economics of neglect", that Vasavi (2019) points out, refers to how the complexities of various needs and structural realities of rural India has often been overlooked. Instead of addressing these realities, there is an operation of "the politics of rescue" that has been described as, "the political system's way of handling the rural in a competitive electoral democracy" (p. 38) through a "regime of 'welfare governmentality'" with "programmes that camouflage the foundational problems of rural India" (p. 39). This "neglect" of rural India makes it highly "dependent" on urban areas. As Kumar (2014, p. 42) highlights, "The city sets the norms, the village attempts to follow them" (p. 42). Within the formation of such status quo, the role of modernization, and significantly that of formal education, has been to gradually transform the rural into the urban.

With modernity-induced industrialization process in India and in the recent decades, the entry of neoliberal market ideology, rural areas are in transition. There has been a decline in agriculture and traditional industries. This shift in the employment structure has compelled

the rural population to be increasingly drawn into national and international labor market. This has heightened the emphasis on rural young to be being formally educated and to follow the urban-centric mobility pathways into the highly competitive job market in search of secure, salaried employment. With the strategies of the urban, middle classes being highly attuned to the needs of changing economic scenario (Fernandes and Heller, 2008; Kaur, 2021; Nambissan, 2010; Sancho, 2013), the rural youth face great challenges to actualize the "meritocratic promise of modern education" (Hall, 2017: 169). As Vasavi (2019) argues, "Far from enabling quality of educational opportunities and equality of quality education, educational institutions for the masses in general and for rural masses in particular are increasingly sites of humiliation, and fail to cater to the abilities of youth" (p. 37). Thus, within the context of what Velaskar (2013) refers to as the highly "stratified" educational system, whereby the education that the rural young can access, if at all, is of a lower quality, the question that arises is where, within the hierarchy of the new employment structure, will such youth eventually be accommodated.

By reinforcing the idea that the rural is "deprived", formal education is looked at as something that pull the rural young into subscribing to the dominant notions of "success" and "achievement." The skills and knowledge the rural young bring to school are often rendered irrelevant. Morrow (2013), in her study of young people in rural Andhra Pradesh, critiques the focus of modern policy discourses and literature on youth transitions to "independent adulthood" that do not take into consideration the realities of rural young people who often have to join work early and are bound by relationships of "interdependence" with their families and their communities. Similar arguments about the devaluation of rural contexts and the roles played by young people living in them have been raised by Katz (1991), Punch (2002), Wierenga (2011) for rural contexts in other parts of the world. Dyson (2014) in her ethnographic exploration of young people's lives in a small mountain village in Uttarkhand illustrates how work obligations outside school contributes to the formation of positive self-identity of these young people. Dyson's findings show how young people, from an early age of seven or eight years, contribute to the household economy often engaging in tedious and risky work of collecting forest produce, herding cattle, and taking care of household chores. These young people are seen to fill in for adults whenever required. Dyson argues that being recognized as "competent young people" (p. 12) owing to their contribution to the rural community, these young people develop a positive self-image and a sense of agency.

Besides its urban-centric orientation, education in rural areas also suffer from various issues of access and quality. There have been numerous studies on the various educational

challenges faced by the rural and marginalized young people, globally (Alston and Kent, 2009; Ansell, 2004; Corbett, 2007, 2009; Llyod, 2005; Punch, 2002; Panelli et al., 2007; Shildrick and MacDonald, 2007; Wierenga, 2011). In India, limited access to education (especially at the post-primary levels), child labor, and poor quality of government schools have been highlighted as some major issues facing rural young people (see Drèze and Kingdon, 2001). These are further exacerbated by gender, caste, and class identities of the students (Drèze and Kingdon, 2001; Velaskar, 2013; Ramachandran, 2016). The various sections of the rural population are not endowed with equal capacities to realize those aspirations. When one takes the socio-economic background and other identity markers, there is further division of the rural young into smaller *class fractions* (see Parry, 2005) of relative privilege and marginality. The ones coming from the rural elite and rural middle-class families with relatively secure income or land ownership are seen as being able to provide the requisite resources for education. They have higher chances of accessing educational institutions in urban areas or the local private schools, thereby, giving them some level of advantage over the others within the rural areas. It is understood that the most disadvantaged are usually the children of the laboring classes, those without land and engaged in marginal work.

Moving beyond class, various other factors also affect the ability of rural youth to navigate their educational pathways toward viable futures. The stress on urban-centric curriculum and mobility emphasizes the "polarity between rural and urban living", that eventually renders the "educated" "unfit for adjustment" to the ethos of village life (Kumar, 2014, p. 43). Due to this dominant notion, not only are "educated" young people pushed out of rural communities to seek urban opportunities, in some cases, they (or their parents) actively choose not to leave. Froerer (2011) in her study of *adivasi* youth located in rural Chhattisgarh, points out the different educational trajectories between the Oraon Christians and Ratiya Kanwar Hindus. For the Oraon Christians, a "historical willingness" (p. 699) to migrate for employment opportunities, relative lack of rootedness to the village due to non-ownership of cultivable land, and the social capital provided by the Church and the larger Christian community were instrumental in young people staying on in education harboring aspirations for viable employment in larger cities and towns later in life. On the other hand, for those coming from the Hindu landholding families, the need to gain educational qualifications and migrate outside for better opportunities was often surpassed by the familial expectations to stay back and join agricultural work. Without the required social capital and economic resources needed to translate educational qualifications into viable employment in

urban areas, many families chose to opt out of education and make their children pursue the traditional occupation of agriculture and, in the case of girls, marriage and household work. Parents were seen to make an early decision to pull away their child from school as they considered education "to be an expensive and time-consuming means to an end that is not achievable by people such as themselves" (p. 704). Unlike Ratiya Kanwar Hindus of Froerer's (2011) study, Jakimow (2016) finds that rural agricultural laborer's in Telengana, despite their awareness of the "almost impossibility of getting ahead through education" still hold on to "hope through education" for their children (p. 11).

This study draws on the broader context of the embedded nature of inequality in Indian education. It will explore the educational experiences of young people who find themselves at the lower level of what Ramachandran (2016: 91) calls the "parallel structures of education" owing to their social and physical locations. However, Froerer's (2011) and Jakimow's (2016) ethnographic explorations discussed earlier illustrate the need to go beyond the simplistic discourse of marginality and privilege between rural and urban or within rural places. It is also important to note that rural areas themselves are changing and are in a phase of transition. There is, thus, a need to recognize the diversity of educational experiences among the rural young. Following such concerns, this study will take an in-depth look at the variations within rural youth in their ability to engage with the education and the "promises" it offers. It will attempt to understand the multiple ways in which marginality and privilege presents itself and how the young people strive to navigate through them.

Theorizing Young People's Aspirations Within the Context of Uncertainty

Applying Beck's (1992, 2000) idea of increasing "individualization of risk" in the neoliberal times, Furlong and Cartmel (1997/2007) argue that young people, especially the less advantaged ones, are often held responsible for their "failures," thereby downplaying the role of structural inequities brought about by class, gender, ethnicity, and race in perpetuating the status quo (p. 5-6). The constant shifts in the requirements and skills demanded by an ever-evolving labor market, make it increasingly difficult for young people to plan for their futures. It is within this context of uncertainty and precarity that youth aspirations need to be conceptualized. Two influential theoretical approaches – the Bourdeusian and the rational choice approaches – look at the role of structural and individual factors in the study of aspirations. The Bourdieusian approach (Burke, 2015; Hart, 2012/2014; Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2010; Reay, David and Ball, 2005, Stahl, 2015) sees aspirations as reflecting the capacity of people to draw on various capitals primarily based on their class position within a

particular society. Here, aspiration and its realization are often seen as being dependent on the class-based advantages or disadvantages that one can bring into the field. Hence, the Bourdieusian approach outlines the way aspirations (and outcomes) are often limited by class-related constraints. On the other hand, the rational choice perspective (Breen and Goldthorpe, 1997; Goldthorpe, 2007) takes the *economic rational actor* as their point of departure. It emphasizes how young people, cognizant of their economic and social circumstances, make aspirations based on their calculations of the risks and costs of the available options, choosing those that have higher chances of meeting success in the future.

Recent empirical studies have shown that aspirations may not necessarily be the reflection of an individual's stocks of capital, nor a rational assessment based on one's socio-economic context. Appadurai's (2004, p. 67) notion of the "capacity to aspire" is that it is essentially a "cultural capacity" that is "formed in interaction with and in the thick of social life." Along the same line of thought, Ray (2003, p. 1) defines aspirations as the "social grounding of individual desires." Not only are aspirations produced through the interaction of individuals with their socio-cultural milieu, but aspirations also reflect the uncertainties that characterize the context inhabited by the young people. It provides a window into the lived realities and anxieties of young people in a rapidly changing social landscape.

The prevalence of high aspirations among youth in disadvantaged situations has given rise to new ways of conceptualizing the formation and meaning of aspirations. Frye (2012), in her critique of the rational choice perspective, looks at the idea of what she terms "the tenacity of optimism" (p. 1598) in the high aspirations of schoolgirls in Malawi despite the various odds stacked against them. She employs a pragmatist perspective that focuses on the social meaning of aspirations as opposed to rational calculations, thereby interpreting the schoolgirls high educational aspirations as "assertions of a virtuous identity" and self-worth (p. 1565). Similarly, Baker (2016) puts forth an alternative approach to study aspirations that gives importance to "moral meanings":

> Young people's ideas about fairness and responsibility often tell us a great deal about how they understand the world around them, particularly with regard to how they make sense of opportunity. By focusing on these dimensions of young peoples' worldviews, we can gain fresh insights into their experiences of advantage and disadvantage. (p. 10)

Hall (2017) while reviewing Dohrn's (2017) study of Feza schools in Dar es Salaam shifts away from the notion that the interplay between structure and individual agency produces either "subjects" or "resisting agents" (p. 164). Instead, she argues that young

people (and their significant others) could be contemplating and navigating "multiple aspirational horizons" that expand over "multiple temporal framings" (Hall, 2017, p. 164). Similarly, Hart (2012/2014, 2016) proposes at a detailed multidimensional model of aspirations based on the level of autonomy or influence in the formation of aspirations, the time scale to which aspirations refer to, and the evolving or changing nature of aspirations. She also points out that aspirations "may be latent (unarticulated, evolving, abstract and uncertain) and can surface suddenly or emerge slowly" (2016, p. 326).

Zipin et al. (2013) drawing upon "the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Raymond Williams, Arjun Appadurai and the authors in the Funds of Knowledge tradition" (p. 227) call on researchers to rethink aspirations of marginalized youth. They propose a layered and fluid conceptualization of aspirations, "drawing not just on dominant policy and populist ideologies but on multiple social-cultural resources" (p. 230) coming up with three interlacing categories of aspirations: *doxic*, *habituated* and *emergent*. Doxic aspirations, often articulated by the young people in research interviews, are a reflection of powerful societal discourses or what Zipin et al. call "populist-ideological mediations"; habituated aspirations are embedded in the situatedness or "social-structural positions" of the young people and, thus, are more constrained than the doxic aspirations; finally, emergent aspirations, rarely articulated by the research participants, refers to the participants' agency or ideas in the making about "potential alternative futures" that requires a thorough engagement of the researcher with his study participants in order to help the latter conceptualize and voice them.

Within the context of uncertainty and rapid change in neoliberal India, several empirical works on young people have tried to understand youth aspirations and strategies through varied lenses. Lukose (2005, 2009) and Nakassis (2016) focuses on youth consumption and style to understand the youth challenges and contestations in contemporary India. These works show how cultural practices of Indian youth reflect a constant negotiation between traditional expectations and the demands brought about by the currents of modernity and globalization. Lukose (2005, 2009) points out how Indian youth form new consumer identities that incorporates global sense of fashion and style with gendered notions characteristic of India's postcolonial preoccupations with tradition and modernity. Likewise, Nakassis (2016) highlights how through various reflexive acts of "doing style" young people revealed their aspirations as well as the boundaries they created for themselves showing an ability to balance and move in-between the local, national, and global terrains.

While Indian youth are seen to have a certain degree of agentic control over the creation of their own subjectivity and self-image, the role of family emerges as a crucial

factor in understanding the young people's aspirations regarding education and employment. Sancho (2013) brings in the concept of "aspirational regimes" that refer to "the parental authoritarian projects through a neoliberal discourse that celebrates youthful entrepreneurship" (p. 160). The "aspirational regimes" described by Sancho (2013) shows how Indian middle-class youth are subjected to high parental aspirations for upward social mobility that involved parents ensuring their child's entry into the global labor market through education. Beneath a discourse of new Indian youth being "enterprising", "ambitious", "disciplined", and "driven", Sancho argues that there is hidden operation of "intensive parenting" with parents heavily intervening in most aspects of their child's education such as choosing the "right" schools, investing in coaching classes, and handling decisions about their future careers (p, 160). Similarly, Kaur (2021) in her study of IIT (Indian Institute of Technology) students and their parents also looks at middle class parenting strategies that consisted of not just material investment but also various other "sacrifices", especially by mothers, with the latter often withdrawing from paid work to ensure a conducive learning environment for their children. Kaur's (2021) findings show how at the time of preparation for the highly competitive IIT entrance examination, mothers even migrated with their children to places where prominent coaching centers were located to take care of their child's daily needs, while the fathers stayed back at their place of work.

While both Sancho (2013) and Kaur (2021) focus on middle class families and their aspirations to join the new globalized economy, for many in India, there is an "undimmed enchantment of the state" (Kumar, 2019: 2). Young people in India continue to look at the state for education, employment, and other welfare benefits (Kumar, 2019; Upadhya, 2016). Kumar (2019) argues that one of the most important sources of anxiety among the Indian youth is due to high improbability of gaining secure employment. While middle class youth are actively engaged in converting their inherited forms of capital into well-paid jobs in the private sector, the lower-middle and lower class youth face greater uncertainty and precarity of employment in the new economy (see Gilbertson, 2017; Jeffery, 2010; Upadhya, 2016; Upadhya & Chowdhury, 2022). Young people coming from the marginalized sections of Indian society are "compelled to aspire by the myth of upward mobility achieved through education in a rising India, relatively unsheltered from the consequences of misjudgement" (Gilbertson, 2017: 31).

This study is situated within these conceptualizations of aspirations and concerns raised by contemporary empirical studies of youth in India to accommodate the fluidity and the ambiguity of aspirations that is characteristic of a changing social landscape. At the face

of multiple uncertainties, especially those coming from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds, the view of aspirations as multidimensional, dynamic, and tentative (Hart, 2012/2014, 2016; Zipin et al., 2013) becomes an important one to consider. Prior aspirations may become layered with emergent ones, with either one or none taking precedence or fading away. Aspirations may also lie in "wait" (Jeffrey, 2010) for the opportune moment to show up. Appadurai (2004, p. 69) also views "the capacity to aspire" as a "navigational capacity" the mastery of which is concentrated among the more privileged members of society. Due to this, the poor are said to have a "more brittle horizon of aspirations" (p. 69). This "brittle" character of aspirations is perhaps captured by the notion of "idealistic aspirations" (Haller, 1968; Kintrea et al., 2011; St Clair et al., 2013) and how there is "levelling" (MacLeod, 2009) of these idealistic aspirations into more "realistic" ones. The *idealistic* and *realistic* typology, to a large extent, correspond to what Zipin et al. (2013) refer to as *doxic* and *habituated* aspirations respectively. With uncertainty around past pathways of mobility, the young may hold multiple aspirations with subjective, instrumental, and social meanings attached to them. Unsure of the *rules of the game* (Bourdieu, 1979/1984) or the rewards at the end, young people and their parents could hold on to various possibilities for the future not sure which of those will materialize. Or as Zipin et al. (2013) point out, "recent historical contexts present particular conditions for mood swings between habituated sobriety and doxic fantasy in aspiring" (p. 234).

Though this study attempts to look at both the aspirations and outcomes of the young people (see the Methodology section in this chapter), my approach is, however, more focused on the processual aspects of aspiration making and its realization. This study is not an attempt to look for a correlation between the participants' aspirations and their levels of attainment. I try and understand their aspirations and the various influences on them with an intention to see what happens to these aspirations and what is required to convert them into actual outcomes. The study is an exploration of rural young people's lives, hopes and strategies in the face of the various structural constraints. Therefore, aspiration is taken as a point of entry into the lives of the young people and as an aid to help understand the various subjectivities, identities, and experiences that emerge as they go through the transition from school to higher education and to work.

The Background of Rapid Change in Sikkim

Due to the specific historical context of Sikkim's incorporation into the Indian Union in 1975, rapid changes took place in the state, post-merger with India. These changes consisted

of an exponential growth of the state bureaucracy, development of transport and communication system, growth of tourism sector, and the establishment of hydropower projects. Despite a late start, the introduction and rapid expansion of mass schooling was another important dimension of the change that took place from the 1980s onwards (Chapter Three). In the past two decades, the government, by providing attractive tax incentives, has actively encouraged the entry of private companies, especially pharmaceutical ones. Also, there has been statewide implementation of organic farming and ecotourism.

Owing to its strategic geo-political location and historical trajectory, Sikkim has enjoyed a special status within the Indian Union. With a relatively large inflow of funds coming in from the central government (Lama, 2001), low population and stable political environment, the state has made many positive strides in various sectors. Poverty levels in the state has sharply declined in the past two decades with only 8.2 per cent of the total population below poverty line in 2011-12, much below the national average of 21.9 (Government of Sikkim [GoS], 2015). In terms of per capita income, in 2011-12, Sikkim ranked among the top five states in India. According to GoS (2015, p. 6), "Between 2004-05 and 2011-12, Sikkim's real per capita income grew at an annual average rate of around 15 per cent – the highest among Indian states and more than twice the national average of 6.7 per cent per annum." The literacy rates in Sikkim have also shown drastic increase from 33 per cent in 1981 to 82 per cent in 2011. Female literacy rates increased from 22 per cent in 1981 to 76 per cent in 2011.

Resneck (2010) points out the various consequences of rapid changes and "superficial prosperity" of the state, namely, consolidation of power owing to the prolonged rule of one political party, environmental degradation, lack of regulation of tourism related traffic into the state, marginalization of indigenous communities (the Lepchas, in particular) due to the entry of hydro-power projects, and lack of proper planning and direction in policies like that of organic farming. In addition, despite various "achievements", Sikkim has a high incidence of suicide[1], drug abuse, alcoholism, especially among the young (GoS, 2015). Unemployment of the young people, especially in rural areas of the state, is another worrying trend that has become a matter of huge concern for the state government in the past two decades (see Chapter Six). Vasavi (2019) links suicides among the educated, unemployed rural youth to the "failure of the education system to either enable youth to gain formal

[1] In 2013, Sikkim recorded the highest suicide rate of 29.3 per cent amongst all Indian states (see GoS, 2015, p. 71).

employment opportunities or be oriented to life in the rural areas" (p. 37). In Sikkim, despite high enrolment of students and huge growth in the number of schools at all levels, there have been high drop-out rates and low learning levels of students, especially those in rural government institutions (see Chapter Three). These trends are worrying, especially given the fact that Sikkim is one of the smallest states in India with a low population. Also, owing to the relatively large size of its bureaucracy[2], there are high expectations on the state government to perform better.

The rural areas of Sikkim, as elsewhere are undergoing a process a change toward urbanization. The shift from an agricultural society has led to proliferation of white-collar occupations. The "security" and "stability" associated with formal public sector employment, specifically within the state government, has resulted in a high demand for government jobs. Thus, within the past three decades, the need for education has rapidly increased among the people. Over the years, however, the interrelationship between educational qualifications and secure government employment has become tenuous. Since the 1990s, the state, faced with the problem of overemployment within the public sector, has limited the hiring of new employees. This has compelled young people to turn toward the private sector for jobs. Various private establishments setting up their manufacturing units inside the state, especially the pharmaceutical firms, have become an important source of employment. Hydel power projects, breweries, various small industries, tourism, small businesses, and entrepreneurship have emerged as sources of alternative forms of employment. Despite the availability of private employment, the desire for government jobs is still strong. This has led to an inflation of educational credentials, making higher education a significant need for the young within the state. Beginning from the early 2000s, there has been a sharp increase in the number of higher education institutions within the state (Chapter Three).

During the early years of Sikkim's merger, the upward social mobility brought about by the changing employment structure was limited to those who had the ability to quickly adapt to the transition (Chapter Two). For those left behind, especially the rural residents working in the agricultural and manual jobs, education remains a primary pathway for their children to access the coveted white-collar jobs in the public sector. However, the state, by endorsing an urban-centric development plan, has left a large proportion of the rural population facing poor infrastructural issues and limited access to various resources.

[2] Among the north-eastern states, Sikkim has one of the highest number of employees working in the public sector (Planning Commission, 2008).

Education in the rural areas suffer from prioritization of access over quality (Chapter Three). Due to Sikkim's relatively late introduction of mass schooling, 1980s onwards, a large majority of the students, especially in the rural areas, are either first generation to go to school or come from families with low educational qualifications. They also largely come from what we can term as the lower middle to lower rural classes[3] of the state. Thus, the students in rural areas have to navigate through various limitations and disadvantages in order to follow the dominant discourse in Sikkim of acquiring secure white-collar occupations through the formal educational pathway.

Also, the unique historical trajectory of Sikkim has given rise to the formation of categorization of the people into "Sikkimese" and "non-Sikkimese" based on their domiciled status (see Chapter Two for an extended discussion on this). In brief, the domiciled status is tied to politics of ethnicity and representation of various ethnic groups within Sikkim. More important for the study is that the Sikkimese domicile confers certain educational and employment advantages to those who hold it. Thus, in addition to social class and geographical location, the domiciled status of students may lead to charting out of differential pathways for education and work. There may also be the deployment of what Modood (2004) and Shah et al. (2010) call "ethnic capital", a concept used to explain the high aspirations of British Pakistani youth despite coming from a marginalized group, by the various ethnic groups in Sikkim.

Within the context of a late and uneven modernisation, a complex historical trajectory, an increasing precariousness of the labor market in a rapidly changing landscape of the state, this study explores the educational aspirations and choices of senior school and college students in rural Sikkim. The broad objectives that guide the study are as follows:

1. To understand the educational experiences of students studying in a rural senior secondary school and college in Sikkim.
2. To find out the educational (and occupational) aspirations of the students and investigate the role of various factors in shaping these aspirations.
3. To understand how students have been able to materialize their aspirations given their agentic potential and constraints.

From the objectives, the research questions this ethnography seeks to answer include:

[3] The categorization of various classes employed in the study has been discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

1. What are the higher educational aspirations of students studying in a senior secondary school and college in a rural area? What are the educational choices (of type of schooling, streams, and place of study) they have made and why? How do they wish to take these choices further?
2. What are their experiences of education in school and college? How do these influence students' perception of education and thereby, their future aspirations?
3. How do the various other aspects of students' lives, past or present, shape their educational aspirations? In other words, what is the role of biography, schooling history, family, peer group, location, ethnicity, and other social factors in how the students perceive their future goals and plans?
4. Where do they situate education within the larger context of employment? What are their employment goals and where do their educational aspirations fit within the trajectory of such goals?
5. What happens to the students after school and college? How does the larger structural context of a changing society interact with the post school pathways of the young people under study? What are the various strategies devised by them to deal with the various challenges faced by them?

Methodology

This is an ethnographic study, and a range of methods were used. The fieldwork began with the collection of preliminary data in 2008 that was aimed at understanding the educational context within Sikkim. The preliminary fieldwork consisted of conducting interviews with educationists, teachers, administrators, journalist and of gathering secondary data (official data, statistics, reports, and so on).

The ethnographic fieldwork in Rhenock, a small rural town in East Sikkim, began in 2010. The term "rural town" has been used for Rhenock keeping in mind its changing social landscape. As per the Census of India 2001 and 2011, Rhenock was recognized as the only "census town" in Sikkim (Directorate of Census Operations, 2001, 2011). Owing to this, Rhenock is included in the list of towns identified as urban areas of Sikkim. As a census town, however, Rhenock does not have a statutory town status. According to the Directorate of Census Operations, statutory towns are those that are governed by urban local bodies such as a municipality, corporation, cantonment board or notified town area committee etc. Thus, due to its non-statutory town status, administratively speaking, Rhenock is a rural area. At the time of the initial fieldwork in 2011-2012, the Block Administrative Centre [BAC] of

Rhenock revenue block looked after 2 *Gram Panchayat* Units (GPUs), Rhenock and Sudunglakha, which were further subdivided into 18 panchayat wards in total.[4] Keeping aside the contradictions brought about by "the politics of urban classification" (Denis et al., 2012), the social characteristics and orientation of Rhenock is largely rural, being composed of multiple village localities brought together by a small marketplace called Rhenock bazaar. The historical trajectory and the rural social orientation of Rhenock has been described in more detail in Chapter Two.

Methodologically, Rhenock offered an interesting case study to be looked at. At the time of the study, Rhenock was the only other place, besides the two major towns of Namchi and Gangtok with a government degree college. Being founded in 2005, the college was hailed as an initiative to provide higher education to rural students. To capture rural young people's transition from school and contestation with higher education, Rhenock, among other places in Sikkim, provided an appropriate context for the study. Also, being located at the easternmost border of Sikkim and West Bengal, Rhenock had the complex dynamic of "local" and "non-local" interaction, with many students from the surrounding villages of West Bengal migrating to Rhenock for both school and higher education. The changing socio-economic landscape of Rhenock was also significant to the study. With its location near one of the major tributaries of Teesta River, two manufacturing units of the pharmaceutical company, Chemical Industrial and Pharmaceutical Laboratories Limited (CIPLA), were established in Kumrek and Rorathang (in 2007 and 2008, respectively), a few kilometers away from Rhenock. This was seen as a major shift in the employment structure of the largely agricultural villages in and around Rhenock. Thus, Rhenock, at the time of the study, presented a rural context rapidly undergoing various processes of change which may have important ramifications for youth aspirations for education and employment.

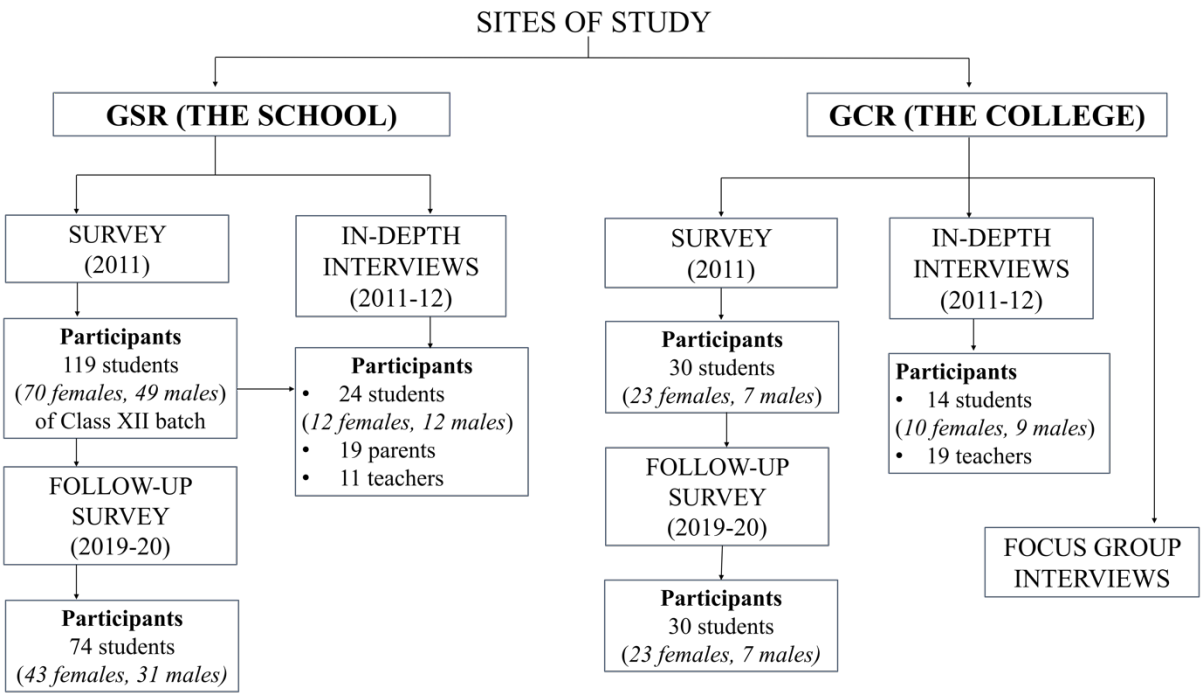
Initially, with an aim to get a sense of the field location, its history and its educational context, informal, loosely structured interviews of young people, teachers and residents were taken. Then the Government Senior Secondary School, Rhenock (GSR) and Government College Rhenock (GCR) were narrowed down as the two main sites of the research. In 2011, all final year students of both GSR (2011-12) and GCR (2011-12) were selected for an initial survey. The rationale for taking students in the final year in both the institutions was based on an understanding that leaving school/college marked a major transition period for the

[4] In 2021, with subsequent reorganization of GPUs and the BACs in Sikkim, the Rhenock BAC had a total of 4 GPUs (see Notification No. 08/RDD dated 11.03.2021 issued by Rural Development Department, Government of Sikkim) covering 24 panchayat wards under its jurisdiction.

participants. It was a time when students would be actively involved in making decisions about their future, about what they were going to do next. It was important for the purposes of the study to be able to interact with the students (and their families) during this period of their lives.

Figure 1.1

Scheme of the Fieldwork



From the GSR, 119 (out of 155) students returned the questionnaire while in the college 30 (out of 32) students who were enrolled participated in the survey. The survey enquired about their schooling history, education and occupation of their parents, their stream choices, and future educational goals. Some open-ended questions regarding their hobbies, their idea of success and their role models were also explored themes, amongst others. From the responses, a purposive sampling was done for the in-depth interviews keeping in mind there was an equitable representation of the students by gender, subject choice, social category, domiciled status, and socio-economic background. From the purposive sampling, in-depth interviews with 24 school students and the 14 college students were conducted in 2011-12. The in-depth interview schedule for the students consisted of questions about their biography, educational experiences, subject choices, future aspirations, family life, peer

group, recreational life, locality, and their perceptions about the world. Parents of the 24 school students were also interviewed along with 11 school teachers and 19 college teachers to understand the perspective of what has been termed the "significant others" in academic literature. With the parents, the interviews revolved around the issues of their involvement in their children's education, schooling and further educational choices and decision making, their relationship with their child, their expectations, and anxieties regarding their children's future. Teacher interviews explored the views about the school or college, their perceptions about their students, and their work experiences and challenges. In the college where the number of participants were less, focus group discussions with 2nd year and 3rd years students (20 in all) in 2012 and 2013 were conducted to include more diverse experiences and opinions of the students. Few of the students interviewed in school had joined the college and were also represented in the focus group discussions.

I worked as a faculty member at GCR for a period of seven years from 2009 to 2016. The study also draws from my fieldnotes as a participant observer. My experiences, observations, and daily interaction with students, parents, and teachers (other than those selected for the study), and the residents provided me with crucial information regarding the perceptions of people and the socio-cultural context of the place. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes that emerged with analysis of the data. The interview sessions were guided by a semi-structured schedule with open-ended questions since the attempt was to keep it informal, more as an interaction, a conversation between the researcher and the interviewee (Kvale, 1996). Interruptions were avoided and kept minimal to let the interviewees take charge of where they wanted their narratives to go. Only after their narratives had run its course was the next query put forth.

In 2019-20, I did a follow-up survey to find out what had happened to the student participants on leaving the school and the college. 74 participants from the school and all 30 from the college responded, giving me details of their educational attainment and destinations, and their current occupational status and place of work. While I met with a few of the former students, I had to rely on phone conversations for most as they were in different places inside and outside Sikkim. In this, I acknowledge the help extended by some of the participants and even teachers who were able to get me in touch with either their batchmates or students. Although in-depth interviews were not conducted in the follow-up study, the participants shared their experiences and opinions about their current situation. Many who were not in education and not employed talked about what they were looking at in the future. Here, it is important to note the loss of sample between the first and the follow-up survey

among the student participants from the school. Out of the119 students (who had had participated in the first survey of 2011) only 74 responded. The follow-up survey also had a higher representation of those from the lower-middle class (see Chapter Three for the class categories employed in the study) than those from the lower-class sections. To address this gap, the comparative analysis of the data from the earlier and the follow-up survey in Chapter Six has been limited to the 74 students who participated in both surveys.

The approach adopted for the fieldwork was influenced, to a large degree, by the reflexive methods of conducting ethnography, which urges the researcher to understand the broader social context in order to make sense of the specific and the unique situations; to conduct the interviews more as a dialogue or an interaction rather than treating the respondents as passive subjects; to cultivate self-awareness and be conscious of the influences the researcher's presence can have on the research process (Bourdieu, 1996; Burawoy, 1998). Being a Sikkimese Nepali and having stayed at the place of fieldwork for seven years have been beneficial for the research process. Bourdieu (1996) highlights the importance of "social proximity" and "familiarity" as "two of the social conditions for 'non-violent' communication" (p. 20), which helps in better interpretation of the interaction with the interviewees by situating the interactions within the wider social and cultural context.

The status of being a "teacher-researcher" in the place of study proved limiting at times. In the school, where I was an outsider, I had to contend with the issue of reactivity brought about by the presence of the researcher on the setting and the participants. Government institutions and offices in Sikkim generally have the tendency to view research with some distrust. I had experienced this during my preliminary fieldwork as well. In the government offices in Gangtok where I was trying to gather statistics on education and employment and trying to interview administrators on their views on education. In these offices, many questions were asked about my background and research. Primarily the administrators wanted to know if I was from Sikkim and often enquired about my family. I was made to wait, for weeks at times, for the statistical data, which were often printouts of what was already there in the government websites. As one administrator in the HRDD told me in hushed tones, "We have to be very careful about what we reveal. One of my colleagues got suspended for talking about the drop-out rates in Sikkim." Similarly, in the school, I often felt that there was some level of monitoring of the students and teachers during my visits. There was a concerted effort on the part of the school authorities and senior school teachers in maintaining student discipline and decorum around me. Teachers would often apologize for the noise and commotion during the breaks. It seemed important for the school authorities

to be able to show an image of smooth functioning and disciplined school in front of outsiders. Few of the student interview narratives highlighted the stringent disciplinary measures taken by school authorities when students violated the rules. I, however, did not witness such instances during my visits to the school.

Also, due to the busy schedule of the school leaving students, it was difficult for the school authorities to give me more time to interact with the students inside the school. Thus, the in-depth interviewing of the students (and their parents) was carried out in their respective homes where I found the environment to be more conducive for detailed conversations. However, while interviewing students and parents at home, it was also important to ensure both parent and student interviews were taken separately, to reduce the influence of parents' influence on the responses of their child or vice-versa. Sometimes, this could not be done due to lack of space or interruptions by parents. The interview responses that were likely to have been affected by the presence of family members were marked and asked again separately. In some cases, these responses were treated as non-data, especially when the content was not significant to the study.

With some of the parents, being a teacher in the local college, I was also asked to give advice to their children about their future educational plans. The parents would often ask me questions about higher education and about the prospects of the academic choices made by their children. While the interviews were being recorded, the parents were often cautious while talking about the school. The extent of their public expression about schools would often be marked by lack of awareness about what goes on inside schools and many parents also held the view that the academic performance of their children depended on the latter's ability to "work hard." However, some of the parents were more critical about the school and shared their anxieties about their children's futures more openly often after the recorder for the interview had been put away. I often had to quickly note down these unrecorded responses the moment I reached home after these interviews. Even with students, many of them were more comfortable and open about their views on various issues outside of the recorded interview sessions. After the interviews were over, some of the students would accompany me on my way back and shared anecdotes and experiences which were very insightful and helped me in understanding their context better. I would also run into students and parents I had interviewed in the bazaar or various localities of Rhenock. Thus, the informal and unscheduled interactions were certainly helpful in developing a richer understanding of the lives of the participants.

The fieldwork in the college posed certain challenges considering my role as an "insider researcher" (Mercer, 2007). I often felt that being a teacher limited the extent to which some student participants could openly express their opinions to me, especially those related to the college. However, to a great extent, the long-term participant observation proved helpful. Outside of the interviews, there were many occasions that allowed interaction with students. There was classroom interaction and multiple opportunities for informal conversations with the students, such as, during breaks or while conducting various events and excursions. All these aided in developing a more well-rounded understanding of student experiences and their concerns. The focus group interviews also helped by providing a more informal and interactive environment which helped student participants to voice their opinions and debate among themselves. The other challenge of working in the college was the involvement in the micro-politics of the work environment. The faculty members in the college were sharply divided especially with respect to their employment status. The rift between the regular teachers, who were in minority, and the ad-hoc or temporary faculty members was quite well-pronounced. Being a temporary employee during the time of the fieldwork often aligned me with the ad-hoc teachers. The grievances of being a temporary employee was often highlighted in the interviews of ad-hoc teachers while the regular teachers often evaded the issue of employment status and focused more on talking about other issues related to the college. Here, the adoption of the reflexive model of ethnography proved to be of immense help in maintaining a neutral stance. Moreover, as the study's focus was on understanding teacher perceptions of students, the interviews revealed more similarities than differences between the two categories of teachers in their overall assessment of students.

With the research setting being a closely-knit community, a lot of effort has been made to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and their responses. Pseudonyms have been employed and descriptions of the participants and their families have been modified to avoid easy identification. However, the relevant markers necessary for the reader to understand the individual participant's context have been kept unaltered.

Organization of the Chapters

Setting the backdrop for the context of the study, Chapter Two starts with a brief history of Sikkim's geopolitical legacy and its ethnic social composition, highlighting their crucial roles – past and current – on shaping the myriad factors that eventually influenced the Sikkimese identity making process and thereby the aspirations of people within the state. Within the

context of Sikkim's unique social and historical trajectory and the privileges and promises of upward mobility (or lack thereof) that came with them, the chapter describes the pattern of social stratification in the state, and the critical role of modernity in the changing landscape of access to education and employment.

Chapter Three seeks to contextualize the school and the college – the sites of the study – within the larger context of education in Sikkim. The chapter traces the growth of modern education in the state, influenced to a large extent by the early development of formal education by British-India, and, subsequently, by the educational policies and programs of Independent India. Within the huge strides of progress in education that the state has made over the last three or so decades, the evident prioritization of access over quality stands out as a main concern. That coupled with unequal schooling, lack of coherent planning and policy making, funding constraints and inefficient management the chapter argues that there is need to interrogate and reconsider the nature of growth of education and its implications for those accessing education in the rural areas or are from lower sections of the society. Towards the end, the chapter also briefly introduces the two institutions and the profile of students under study.

As its title suggests, Chapter Four explores the possibilities and the limitations on the aspirations of the young people studying in Class XII at Government School Rhenock (GSR). This chapter looks at the significant influences of the school, family backgrounds, parental expectations, cultural values, and various social and self-fashioned identities, on how the students constructed their future goals for education as well as occupation. The promise of modern education emerged as solid ground for students, and their strong belief in the prospects that could materialize through educational pathways presented hope to even those who found themselves short-changing their idealistic ambitions and aspirations for a more realistic one. Resting on this belief, the students weighed the constraints, both real and perceived, to make educational plans and decisions that fitted into the socio-economic and other exigencies of their individual and family lives.

In Chapter Five, we focus on students at Government College Rhenock (GCR) through the lens of their educational aspirations and their choices. The chapter goes on to thematically explore the various influences on the aspirations and further educational decisions of these students. The college, as a newly established institution in the expanding landscape of higher education in Sikkim, plays a pivotal role in not only increasing access to higher education for students in rural areas but also in the inclusion of those faced with various disadvantages (of academic achievement, economic resources, etc.). The chapter

argues that the institutional context of the college, their families, societal perceptions, and the dominant discourses about employment, all intersect with each other and influence how the students chart out their futures. With their entry into higher education creating new possibilities and hopes, this chapter tries to understand how the students' attempt to align their lived "realities" with these new expectations.

Chapter Six locates the young people from the school and the college within the larger context of youth, education, and employment in Sikkim. After looking at the employment scenario in the state, the chapter present the findings of the follow-up survey conducted in 2019-20 of the student participants from both the school and the college, which point to the precarious situation that the rural youth at large find themselves in.

The conclusion highlights the major themes in the trajectories of the young people under study. It looks at the salience of the various constraints and possibilities presented by the educational institutions, class, gender, family, socio-cultural values and identities in the participants' educational and employment aspirations and outcomes. The chapter also shows that despite various constraints and challenges, majority of the young people met with these challenges with either their sustained effort at staying on in education or being on the look-out for better employment options. Finally, the chapter reflects on the overall picture the ethnography presents. With the major shifts in the socio-economic context, the conclusion comments on the implications of the strategies employed by those who were the most deprived.

CHAPTER TWO

Sikkim and Rhenock: A Narrative of Change

This chapter presents an outline of the background context of the study by highlighting certain important aspects of Sikkimese history and society. By providing a window into a brief history, politics, and society of Sikkim, we try to understand the aspirations of the people at large and the effect that can probably have on how young people in the state are looking at their future. The first part of the chapter focuses on how, within the context of the unique historical trajectory and complex ethnic composition of Sikkim, certain identity making processes emerge as significant. In addition to ethnic identities, we also argue that the changes brought about by the process of modernisation had resulted in a pattern of social stratification wherein, despite some degree of upward mobility, there has also been considerable reproduction of past privilege and marginality. We then show how the various strategies and pathways available for social mobility in Sikkim are contingent upon a variety of factors by drawing on the context of employment within the state. Among the many factors, location seems to emerge as pertinent one, especially with the urban centric developmental process in Sikkim since its merger with India in 1975.

In the second part of the chapter, we locate the field area, Rhenock, a provincial town in the East district of Sikkim within the context of Sikkim's developmental trajectory. Starting with a brief historical context of Rhenock, we draw on ethnographic observations and interviews to highlight some aspects of the place, the people and their lives that are important for understanding the local context of the study. From the description of the field area, issues of rurality and of being "left behind" emerge as the main themes to be considered.

Being Sikkimese: A Brief History of the People

Doreen Massey (1991, 1994) argues against the essentialist conceptualization of "space", "place" and "home". Due to the fluidity of the past and with memories constantly in the process of being made, the notion of "place"[5], and thereby, of what we call "home", is also always in the process of being shaped. Sikkim as "home" is resonant among the many ethnic

[5] van Schendel (2011) highlights that the notion of "place" is "a means to power and an insurance against continued powerlessness" (p.37) and that "the politics of belonging" of the "indigenous people" rests upon the delineation of "exclusive homelands," which, however, in the absence of "local/trans-local relationships based upon "indigenous'/non-'indigenous' trust" may become "more intensely chauvinistic, essentialist, exclusive and separatist" (p. 38).

groups living there. The people hold contesting memories of the past and that past is being constantly shaped. Since the migration timeline of an ethnic group is tied to its degree of "indigeneity"[6], history is a contested terrain in the ethno-politics of contemporary society in Sikkim. Every ethnic group aspires for a high level of indigeneity to secure their identity as "genuine Sikkimese", which, as we shall discuss, comes with its own array of benefits and entitlements.[7]

Much of the early history in Sikkim, before the formation of a more centralized political structure, is vague due to lack of written accounts. The formal documentation of history, by the late king, Thutob Namgyal, and his wife, Yishey Dolma (see Namgyal and Dolma, 1908), begins with the events that gave way to the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in the year 1642. With the first king being nominated by Tibetan monks, Tibet's influence on the governance, politics, religion, and culture of the kingdom was strong (Mullard, 2011a, pp. 1-2). Powerful monks often decided the fate and direction of the Sikkimese rulers and their policies (see Basnet, 1974).

Another important characteristic of the history of Sikkim is that the narrative is mainly concerned with the plight of the political and the religious elites, and Sikkim's relationship with the neighboring Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, British India, and later, independent India. The history of the ruling Namgyal family from 1642 to 1975 is that of them holding on to a territory prone to invasion and interference from its neighbors. Mullard (2011a, p. 3) attributes the frequent invasions into Sikkim to the presence of a "dominant and aggressive aristocratic class" leading to a weak organizational structure of the Sikkimese polity. The difficulty in navigating the mountainous and the thickly forested terrain probably also contributed to the place being prone to frequent incursions and movement of people. The porosity of the borders posed problems of making clear demarcations of the territory of

[6] See Karlsson and Subba (2006, Introduction) for a discussion on the debate surrounding the usage of the term "indigenous people," especially in the Indian context. Within the Sikkimese context, the term "indigenous" has varied connotations. In the case of the Lepchas, the term "indigenous" often refers to them being the "original inhabitants" of Sikkim, although the exclusivity of the Lepchas as the "original" or "first" inhabitants have been debated in more recent literature (Dorjee, 2011; Subba, 2013). The term also alludes to the concept of "prior inhabitants" that has been defined as "the descendants of the peoples that occupied a given territory when it was invaded, conquered or colonized by a foreign power or populations" (Stavenhagen, 1994, p. 15, as cited in Karlsson and Subba, 2006). In Sikkim, however, there is ambiguity with respect to the "foreign power" prior to which the notion of indigeneity is to be applied. With various waves of migration of groups of people into Sikkim from Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, British India, and independent India, the term "indigenous" seems to keep shifting, often accommodating increasing number of ethnic groups. Therefore, to capture the changing dynamics, I employ the phrase *degree of indigenity* here.

[7] Vandenhelsken (2020a) points out that the claims of indigeneity also involve the desire to be included in the list of Scheduled Tribes, an ongoing process for many ethnic groups in Sikkim. See also, Subba (2013) for more details.

Sikkim under the Namgyal dynasty. Assigning exclusionary listing of the inhabitants and designating specific timelines to migration of any group in Sikkim has, therefore, proven problematic.

The three main ethnic groups of Sikkim consist of the Bhutias, the Lepchas, and the Nepalis[8]. The Bhutias are said to have migrated to Sikkim as early as the ninth century (Mullard, 2011a, p. 77), in subsequent phases, and they came from various parts of Tibet and Bhutan. As the ruling Namgyal dynasty belonged to the Bhutia ethnic group, the dominance of the Bhutias and the Tibetan Buddhist culture and ethos was and, to an extent, continue to be an important aspect of Sikkimese society (McKay, 2020). Despite the Bhutias' powerful presence, the Lepchas are recognized as being "indigenous"[9] to Sikkim, who evidently migrated from the Brahmaputra basin as early as c. 5000 BC (Mullard, 2011a, p. 9).

As mentioned before, the early part of the Namgyal rule in Sikkim saw much political instability, resulting in Sikkim losing parts of its territories to outside powers. Within the place, there existed a layered relationship of brotherhood and suspicion between the indigenous Lepchas and the ruling Bhutias (Basnet, 1974). Sikkim gradually came under the British protection in the 19th century. With Namgyal dynasty's political vulnerabilities at the face of more aggressive neighbors and British India's steadfast eyes on the possibilities of a vibrant Indo-Tibetan trade (Basnet, 1974, p. 28), the British carefully inched their way into the small kingdom. The British encouraged mass immigration of people from Nepal, preferring the Nepalis to the Lepchas and the Bhutias.[10] The immigration of the Nepalis transformed the demographic profile drastically which led to fear and suspicion among the

[8] The categorisation of the Sikkimese population into the three ethnic groups of Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalis employed here does not take into consideration that there are various other categorizations, each with several socio-political implications. That, however, is beyond the scope of this study. See Vandenhelsken (2009) for a more intricate and nuanced understanding of ethnic categorisation of various groups in Sikkim that is rooted in the various phases of Sikkimese history and history-making.

[9] However, besides the Lepchas, others like the Limboos and the Magars, despite their presence in Sikkimese society prior to the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty, have not been given the ready recognition of being indigenous to the place (Dorjee, 2011, pp. 64-65). The inclusion of the Lepchas and exclusion of the Limboos and Magars as the original inhabitants in the accounts written by British administrators, is speculated to be an omission owing largely out of the visibility and accessibility of the Lepchas. The Lepchas lived in the areas along the Indo-Tibetan trade routes, which were frequented by the British, while the other two communities, Limboos and Magars, stayed hidden in the remote areas of present-day West and South districts of Sikkim (Subba, 2013, p. 137). The visibility of Lepchas vis-à-vis the other groups, can also be attributed to their greater acceptance of the British presence in Sikkim, which, in turn, aided the British to keep a check on the rather suspicious Bhutia rulers (Basnet, 1974). However, the exclusion of the Limboos and Magars could also be due to their inability to negotiate their power position with the ruling Bhutias which may have led to their gradual subsumption into the larger Nepali conglomerate later.

[10] J. C. White, the first Political Officer of Sikkim, writes about the Nepalis, "They are on the whole a steady, industrious and thrifty people, very pushing, and eager to take up new employments, they make excellent settlers, pay their rent regularly, and give no trouble in that way." (1909, p. 9)

Lepchas and Bhutias regarding their numerical strength. The ruling Bhutias and the indigenous Lepchas were reduced to a minority, while the Nepalis became the numerically dominant group. Nevertheless, power and privilege continued to be concentrated in the hands of a select group of Bhutia and Lepcha land-owning families.

The term "Nepalis" or "Nepalese" conflates various caste and ethnic groups with different histories of migration and varying degrees of inhabitation between Sikkim and Nepal, into one category.[11] In popular discourse, the term "Nepali" connotes those with a history of migrating later than the Lepchas and Bhutias, often subjugating the entire lot into lower levels of legitimacy with regard to the degree of belongingness to the place and therefore, to the resources and entitlements that came with it. Without going into the dynamics of each group that make up the larger Nepali conglomerate, the large-scale migration of people from Nepal into Sikkim took place in waves. The first wave occurred around the mid-eighteenth century during the Gorkha invasion of Sikkim, and the second one from the nineteenth to twentieth century, largely due to the active encouragement by the British, and especially after Sikkim became its "protectorate" state in the late 1800s. Subsequently, the migration of Nepalis from the neighboring areas of Sikkim continued till after the merger with India, creating various categories of Nepalis living in Sikkim, ranging from the "more" to the "less indigenous."

In addition to the main ethnic groups of Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis, there are also the "plainsmen" (Sarma, 1994; Thatal, 2020) or the traders and business community of Sikkim, comprising of the Marwaris, Biharis, and others who migrated from different parts of India, again in various points of time. The early migrants are also known by their self-designated term of "old settlers" in Sikkim. The old settlers are said to have been in Sikkim from the late nineteenth century. They migrated to Sikkim when the Indo-Tibetan trade started. They are said to have lost out on being officially recognized as Sikkimese citizens during the early 1960s due to their reluctance to forego their Indian citizenship status in the 1960s[12]. However, the migration of people from other parts of India has increased since

[11] Even before the state formation in Sikkim, there were communities living in the eastern part of Nepal and Sikkim, called the Kirati tribes. Many of these Kirati tribes, which includes the Limboos and Magars, have been subsequently subsumed under the broad Nepali conglomerate due to their gradual incorporation to the state of Nepal. Nepal came into existence after the smaller fiefdoms that existed before were unified as a nation under Prithivi Narayan Shah from the mid 18th to early 19th century (see Pradhan, 1991/2009).

[12] Vandenhelsken points out that, since the "Old Settlers" could not buy land in Sikkim due to the local laws in place since the early twentieth century (2020b: 9-11), they were not able to become "Sikkim Subjects." The notion of "domicile" as per the 1961 Regulation did not allow dual citizenship or ownership of property in another country and had a clause that required "Sikkim Subjects" to have acquired immovable property in Sikkim.

Sikkim's merger with the Indian Union in 1975, and the "old settlers" are often subsumed under the category of "non-locals" or "outsiders" in a place they have inhabited for generations now.

To be a "Sikkimese" in Sikkim is rife with many intricacies and important implications. The boundary between the "local" and the "non-local" must be understood within the context of the history of the place[13]. However, due to the dominance of certain historical narratives, some groups have been, allegedly, more represented than the others. As stated earlier, the legitimacy of the term "Sikkimese" draws upon the degree of indigeneity an ethnic group can claim by quoting the historical timeline of their migration into Sikkim. However, when members within a single ethnic group claim varying histories of migration, the complexity of categorizing any group as being "indigenous" or "migrant" is amplified. Moreover, mere claims are not enough. Officially speaking, the "local" refers to the people and their descendants registered as Sikkim Subjects, as per the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961; and the ones who have a Certificate of Identification (COI) issued post 1989 to accommodate the ones who were "left-out"[14] in the earlier register. Then, there are discrepancies even between the earlier and the latter registered Sikkimese, the most important being the income tax exemption, as per the Section 10 (26 AAA) of the Income Tax Act 1961. This exemption has been extended to the Sikkim Subjects and their descendants but not to the mere COI holders. This has created a multi-tier citizenship within Sikkim, the implications of which are most strongly felt while accessing the special privileges and benefits given to Sikkim after its merger with the Indian Union. Just after the merger, Article 371F was inserted into the Indian Constitution much in line with the preceding Article 370 and the sub-articles of Article 371[15]. Article 371F protects the old laws of Sikkim by giving them continuity till a point of time they are amended or repealed through proper legislative procedure. The most important are the old laws pertaining to property ownership by the locals, the preference given to locals with respect to higher educational quotas and scholarships, and the prioritization of employment of the locals in the public sector (See Vandenhelsken, 2020b, pp. 9-11).

[13] See Vandenhelsken (2020a, pp. 7-9) for a detailed discussion on the making of the "local" and "non-local" within the Sikkimese context.

[14] The issue that has been raised by political parties in the 1980s is that the earlier registration processes, being a bureaucratic exercise, has left out many individuals and groups living in Sikkim for generations (see Kazi, 1993, 2009).

[15] Vandenhelsken (2020a, p. 2) argues that the "federal restructuring" process of the Northeast India between the 1960s and 1980s involved "the granting of differential civic, political and economic rights to communities presumed to be autochthonous" owing largely to the unique historical and political conditions of the region under the colonial rule.

During the post-merger days, Sikkim witnessed a huge influx of people migrating into the state. The 1971 census records the total population of Sikkim at 209,843 persons which increased to 316,385 persons in 1981, showing a 50.77 per cent increase in population, the highest increase in decadal variation from 1861 till 2011. In the face of a continuing influx of migrants into the state, rising population and dwindling resources, for the people, emphasizing their distinctive status as Sikkimese has become more important than ever.

Being a "Sikkimese" and the distinction between the "locals" and the "non-locals," thus, becomes a crucial background context for a study on aspirations of the young people in Sikkim. Despite being a part of India, "Sikkim for Sikkimese" (Kazi, 1993, 2009) is a powerful notion that marks the differential status accorded to the "locals" and is used as a political rhetoric by many state leaders since the 1970s to gather popular support. The population being divided into various hierarchical categories in terms of their domiciled status, accessing the benefits and privileges that come with being a "local" is something that will, in one way or the other, manifest into the aspirations and strategies considered by the young.

Land, Labor, and Ethnicity

Prior to the developments in the late nineteenth and twentieth century, the social stratification of Sikkimese society was largely based on land-labor relations and ethnicity. Land, as it were, symbolically belonged to the ruler who divided it into estates and designated estate managers to take care of it (Basnet, 1974, p. 15). Thus, besides, the ruler's private estates, there were also those that were managed by the estate managers comprising of the *kazis* (traditional land-owning Lepcha and Bhutia nobility) and the head *lamas* (monks), the latter overseeing the monastic estates. At the village level, the landlords were assisted in the collection of revenue by the *mondals* and in the northern part of Sikkim, by the village headmen or *pipons.* However, it is to be understood that in the pre-modern days, the administration was far from efficient and there was no systematic manner of revenue collection, leaving the estates largely under the monopoly of the designated landlords (Mullard, 2011b). Thus, at the top were the landowning class consisting of the ruler, the powerful officials comprising of the *kazis* and the influential monks, and some prominent families close to the ruling family. At the lower end of the spectrum were the common people comprising mostly of tenant

farmers[16] or agricultural laborers. The Nepalis, immigrating to Sikkim from 1860 onwards, were largely incorporated into the larger portion of the impoverished, laboring class, which included Bhutia and Lepcha commoners as well. The Nepalis became cultivators, tenants and laborers for the land-owning class. They also worked in the British developmental projects, such as building of roads, bridges, and buildings. The Nepalis were much sought after to ferry goods during the Indo-Tibetan trade too. Gradually, after 1888, when the British introduced the lessee system, some Nepalis were nominated as lessee landlords, who were given the title of *thikedars, elakadhar or lessee* (Vandenhelshen, 2020b, p.12). This led to a handful of Nepali families, especially from the Newar community, to become landlords.

The traditional landowning Bhutia families imported the sharp distinction between the elites (landowners) and the commoners (landless laborers) from the hierarchical system prevalent in Tibet to Sikkim. The few prominent Lepcha *kazis* or landowners emulated the same, to an extent. Later, the Nepali *thikedars* also brought in a hierarchical system based on caste and land ownership prevalent in the mainstream society of Nepal, into their everyday practices. Basnet (1974) looks at the issues of inequality and exploitation of the laboring classes under the feudal system. In a closed agricultural economy, the stratification of the society into two main classes was quite rigid. Forced labor, slavery, and unfair tenancy rules were highly prevalent. The communal demarcation and caste distinction maintained by the upper sections of society added to the burden of the laboring classes. Due to the difficult hilly terrain, extreme weather conditions, and low connectivity of large areas by road, the exploitation of the agricultural laborer was high. All of these were instrumental in the people's demand for democracy in Sikkim in the late 1940s, under the leadership of the early educated who were inspired by the Indian Independence Movement.

Another factor that was instrumental in the rising demand for change in the status quo was the communal divide between the Nepalis on one hand, and the Bhutias and the Lepchas on the other. With the Nepalis immigrating into Sikkim in large numbers, the *durbar* created distinction between the migrants and the older inhabitants (namely the Bhutias and the

[16] Various forms of tenancy existed in Sikkim in the past. *Mashikotta* was a form of tenancy whereby the tenant had to turn over the entire production from a land over to the landlord to repay the initial loan obtained from the landlord to start cultivation. It was abolished through reforms in the 1950s, but for a long time there was no proper outlining of tenancy rights. Other forms of tenancy, such as *adhiya* (the landlord and the tenant divided the production on a fifty-fifty basis after the seeds for the next growing season had been kept aside) and *kutiya* (the tenant was under a contract to pay a specified amount of his production to the landlord regardless of his level of production) continued (Rose, 1978, p. 218).

Lepchas).[17] The Nepalis' late migration to Sikkim, the ruling class's distrust of them due to the past history of repeated Gurkhas incursions into Sikkimese territory, and the active encouragement of their influx into Sikkim by the British from the late 1800s onwards, caused the Nepalis to be looked upon as "outsiders" compared to the "more indigenous" Bhutias and Lepchas. With the Bhutia-Lepcha group reduced to almost one-fourth of the total population by the mid-twentieth century, the fears of being overshadowed by the increasing Nepali majority constantly occupied the minds of the Bhutia rulers. This communal tension was maintained with state patronage being tilted in favor of the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Coming to the 1900s, a parity system of communal representation[18] was introduced in 1953 for the election of the State Council. It reflected the selective distribution of privileges which the royal *durbar* tried to maintain. The parity formula extended to government appointments and educational opportunities too. The communal ethno-political context combined with the acute disparity between the landed and the landless are seen to contribute to dissent against the traditional political set-up and the eventual ushering in of democracy into Sikkim.

Modern Institutions and New Aspirations

In the twentieth century, with the active intervention of the British in the internal administration of Sikkim (especially during the period 1890-1918), many of the traditional structures underwent change (Rose, 1978). The expansion of the bureaucracy, systematization of the revenue system, the establishment of a centralized judiciary, and the introduction of modern education made way for a certain degree of mobility for the formerly oppressed.

The towns in the Darjeeling district[19], which had been carefully developed into picturesque hill stations with access to most modern amenities, had become a model of

[17] See Vandenhelsken (2020b) for a detailed discussion on the creation of various boundaries of ethnic differentiation in Sikkim over the years by the state. Since the mid-twentieth century, the binary between the Bhutia-Lepcha "natives" on one hand and the Nepali "settlers" on the other from the early 1900s has emerged as one of the major factors that has consequently shaped ethno-politics within Sikkim.

[18] Under the "parity formula," as it was called, the State Council was to consist of twelve, elected seats to be divided equally among the Bhutia-Lepcha and the Nepali communities and five more nominees appointed by the Maharaja. The State Council was to be headed by a President, who was nominated and appointed by the Maharaja. In addition to that, the Nepalese seats were to be voted by the whole electorate of the constituency concerned, whereas the Bhutia-Lepcha seats were, first, to be elected by only the Bhutia-Lepcha voters of the concerned constituency, and then, to be voted again by the whole electorate of the constituency.

[19] The British acquired Darjeeling from the Sikkimese ruler in 1835, in exchange for some pecuniary compensation made per annum, to develop it into a hill station for the British officers and soldiers to recuperate during the hot Indian summer months. However, due to what McKay (2008: 32) refers to as a "cultural misunderstanding" between the Sikkimese ruler and the British about the conditions of the 1835 grant of Darjeeling, the Sikkimese authorities were not pleased with the arrangement. In 1949, the simmering tension between Sikkim and the newly developed Darjeeling led to the arrest of Mr. J. D. Hooker, a British botanist and

"development" in the region. Darjeeling had, since the mid-1800s, quite rapidly emerged as an educational destination for the Indian and British elite children[20]. With active missionary work, there was also growth of schools and colleges for the children of the common people. The vibrant economy, driven by the growth of the tea industry, and various other developmental activities led to creation of employment opportunities for the laboring classes. The work opportunities that came with the rapid development and the absence of the system of slavery in Darjeeling made it a desirable place for common people from Sikkim (as well as from Nepal and Bhutan) to immigrate to. This was much to the annoyance of the ruling class in Sikkim.

Aspirations to be formally educated and to be employed, in varying capacities, within the modern institutions was cultivated by some of the people living in the capital town of Gangtok and in the areas of Sikkim bordering the British-ruled Darjeeling. Many of the early educated from Sikkim, who did not enjoy state patronage or belonged to elite backgrounds, had access to formal education through links with Christian missionaries and relatives and acquaintances living in Darjeeling and Kalimpong.[21] While the above individuals were too few to constitute a social stratum, the number of such early educated Sikkimese gradually increased. [22] At this juncture, in the early decades of the 1900s, white-collar jobs within the administration (especially in the lower positions) or in teaching became an emerging aspiration for some of the Sikkimese people. With time, this desire grew exponentially.

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explorer, and Mr. Campbell, the Superintendent of Darjeeling, at the Chola Pass in Sikkim under the orders of the Sikkimese Prime Minister, Dewan Namgyal, resulting in the Sikkim ruler losing the 6,000 rupees per annum compensation and also the Sikkim Terai and adjoining hill areas of Darjeeling, all of which were added to Darjeeling (see Basnet, 1974, Chapter VII; McKay, 2008).

[20] See O'Malley (1907, pp.170-180) for an account of the growth of both European and vernacular schools in Darjeeling.

[21] Rai's (2021) article, "Chandra Das Rai: In His Own Words", is about one of the pioneering political figures of Sikkim. It also highlights the rise of modern educational aspirations for the young in rural Sikkim in the 1930s and the limited avenues that were available to them:

> It was 1939, the year Hitler declared the Second World War, in Mikhola, a remote village in South Sikkim, the dreams of a young boy all but came to an abrupt end. For some years, the boy had struggled to learn and study under uncertain and unlikely circumstances. With the coming of Birkha Bahadur Subba, a graduate from Darjeeling, the road to education had suddenly opened up for Chandra Das. Subjects like history and geography, in addition to basic reading and writing skills that he had acquired, held promises of a wider horizon. But the teacher, who was instrumental in holding out possibilities, was abruptly called home to Darjeeling, where there was a panic because of the declaration of war. Chandra Das, deeply saddened, went to bid his teacher farewell. To his amazement, his hope revived when his teacher said to him, "Chandra Das, if you ever decide to come to Darjeeling to study, you don't have to worry. I will arrange for your school and lodging." (para. 1)

[22] McKay (2020) writes the following about the early educated Sikkimese:

> While often of humble origin, these Western-educated locals gained status and wealth from their association with the regional power. The result was a class, almost an endogamous caste, of cosmopolitan Sikkimese officials with considerable loyalty to the British empire that had enabled their social progress. (p. 4)

As mentioned earlier, immediately after the Indian Independence in 1947, Sikkim saw a popular political movement demanding the abolition of landlordism, democratization of the polity and accession to India. However, owing to the good relations between the local ruler and the then Congress-led government, the movement was disrupted by making a few changes in the political setup and introducing some reforms in the land labor relations. The Sikkimese ruler was also in talks with the Indian government regarding its political status (Basnet, 1974, p. 79). Much to his disappointment, Sikkim failed to acquire a sovereign status and continued as a protectorate state, this time of independent India, after the signing of the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950. With the onset of the Chinese occupation of Tibet, Sikkim had become a case of concern for the Indian government as a geo-politically sensitive border state.

The Indian government introduced the planned developmental model of India in Sikkim as well. The first was the first Seven Year Plan (1954-61), followed by three Five-Year Plans (1961-66, 1966-71, 1971-75). An estimated total outlay of 39.68 crore rupees was allotted for Sikkim's development from 1954 to 1975 (Lama, 2001: 18). The inflow of funds from the Indian government made it possible to gradually expand the administrative system, establish new industries, and invest in developmental works such as construction of roads, bridges, and hydel-power projects. Importantly, the Sikkim *durbar* started taking an active interest in establishing primary schools across the state (Dewan, 2012, see Chapter 7). The erstwhile privately managed village schools were taken over by the government and some of the prominent schools in the state were upgraded to secondary and senior secondary levels, although the focus was on primary education. However, the changes that took place during this phase were more gradual and controlled due to the quantum of funds available.

During the above phase, as the early educated started entering the employment market, there was a gradual increase in the number of locals within the government services.[23] With the introduction of the Sikkim Subjects' Regulation of 1961, locals were given more preference over non-locals in accessing educational and employment opportunities provided by the state.[24]

[23] In 1918, the total number of government employees stood at 38. This number increased to 4,000 in 1974 (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 56).

[24] As per the data released by the Bureau of Economics and Statistics, Government of Sikkim, in 1978, there were a total of 7,200 government employees out of which 4,307 were Nepalis, 1,386 were Bhutias, 695 were Lepchas and only 812 belonged to the "Others" (synonymous to "non-locals") category (GoS, 1985, as cited in Datta, 1991: 14).

With modern changes, a middle stratum comprising of the newly educated and government employed started emerging in Sikkimese society. However, it is also important to remember that traditional power and privileges allowed the landowning classes and those close to the *durbar* to benefit more from the new changes. Nepotism and favoritism were common practices when it came to the distribution of opportunities and privileges (Basnet, 1974, p. 169). Without much change in the lives of the large section of the population, a second, large-scale political agitation was started in the early 1970s which eventually culminated in the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975, following a series of negotiations and attempt at various political arrangements. The merger is seen by some as a contentious event in the political history of Sikkim (Gupta, 1975). Some (see Datta-Ray, 1984) have highlighted the rather heavy-handed approach of the Indian government, calling it an "annexation." Others (Das, 1983) have argued that the Indian government was tired of appeasing the *Chogyal*,[25] who was allegedly attempting to cultivate a distinct political status for Sikkim within international circles, much to the displeasure of the Indian government.[26] Without any clear vision of an alternative political arrangement, the leaders finally agreed to the Indian government's subtle encouragement to merge with India. McKay (2020) writes:

> The tensions inherent in a state with Indian structures of government and administration but social processes deriving from the construction of a Sikkimese identity that excluded the great majority of the population, would now be played out in the post-colonial period. The path to merger with India was being laid down without any sense of its direction and even with hostility to that destination. (p. 13)

After the merger, many pro-democracy political leaders faced a backlash from oppositional leaders and certain sections of the public with questions being raised about their compliance with the Indian government and the hasty and haphazard way the referendum for the merger was carried out (Kazi, 1993). Despite these misgivings, Sikkim's merger with the Indian Union was unavoidable. The merger marked a major shift in Sikkim's history. The gradual process of modernisation of the earlier phase was to be replaced by rapid changes in all sectors of Sikkimese society.

[25] The traditional title given to the Sikkimese ruler, which was officially recognized by the Indian government after the formal succession of the throne by the last ruler, Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1965.
[26] The *Chogyal* was also proving to be incompetent in resolving the internal tensions within the kingdom, unable to accommodate the aspirations of his people at large. The ruler failed to communicate directly with the local political parties often using the Indian government to act as a mediator (see Das, 1983).

Democracy, Employment, and Mobility

Post-merger with India till the early 2000s, Sikkim received increased inflow of funds from the central government[27]. There was massive expansion of the state bureaucracy, and various developmental works were sanctioned, leading to increased employment opportunities in the public sector (Datta, 1991). A stream of early educated locals, coupled with a large influx of people from outside (Kazi, 2009, p. 168), filled up the government posts rapidly resulting in saturation of employment opportunities in the public sector by the mid 1990s[28]. In the early years of the merger, qualified locals for various posts in the new administrative set-up were few. Hence, many of the migrants were absorbed, if not in permanent posts, then as muster roll and ad hoc employees. This set the precedent for the practice of granting employment on a temporary basis within the state bureaucracy which continues till date. However, in the past two decades, most of the posts, both regular and temporary, have been filled in largely by local candidates. With the increasing number of qualified locals entering the employment market, the question of preferential employment for the locals, as outlined by the Rule 4 (4) of the Sikkim Government Establishment Rules, 1974[29], has emerged as an important political demand. Post-merger, there was also a rapid expansion of the educational system (Planning Commission, 2008: 74), particularly with establishment of new schools and upgradation of existing ones. Increased participation of the people in educational and employment opportunities shaped new aspirations. The popular political discourse highlighting the democratic ideals of social justice and equal distribution of opportunities widened the aspiration window for all. With access to modern institutions, upward social mobility became the inevitable route for all.

After the merger, many routes for upward mobility were available in the newly formed state of Sikkim. The dominant one was that of formal education, usually followed by employment in the state government. Public sector employment placed candidates at various levels of the state administration depending on their level of education. In the initial years of mass government recruitment, even a few years of primary to middle level schooling was sufficient to qualify for lower administrative jobs. Alternative pathway for mobility was self-

[27] See Lama (2001, p. 18, Table 1.8) for the total allocation of funds to Sikkim during the period 1954-2002.
[28] Among the north-eastern states, Sikkim has one of the highest numbers of employees in the government services. (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 56)
[29] As per the Rule 4(4) of the Sikkim Government Establishment Rules, 1974, appointment by both "direct recruitment" or 'promotion from one grade to the other' "shall be made having due regard to the exact nature of specific duties and responsibilities and the qualifications required for the post, *and further provided that (i) Non-Sikkimese nationals may be appointed only when suitably qualified and experienced Sikkimese nationals are not available, and (ii) replacement of such appointees by suitable Sikkimese candidates may be made as and when available*" (emphasis added). (Pradhan, 2006, p. 50)

employment, mainly business and contract work (in the numerous developmental projects undertaken by the government). Working as political party workers provided another popular avenue for the unemployed to generate some income. For the self-employed it was important to cultivate the necessary political and bureaucratic networks and work with the those in power.[30] As for the majority living in the rural areas, agriculture provided the main source of employment. The changes that took place after the merger, thus, has substantially increased the number of people in the middle-income groups concentrated in the urban areas. The upwardly mobile, to access the new opportunities migrated to Gangtok and gradually to the other growing towns in Sikkim.[31] Datta (1991) calls the post-merger upwardly mobile the "new class" of Sikkim, although his definition of the *new class* is that it comprises of "those who use their education to achieve occupational positions in the internal labor market" (p. 107). He categorizes them into professionals (further sub-divided into 3 classes), officials (subdivided into two class), and white-collar employees (comprising of mostly class II workers) (p. 104-105). A closer look at Datta's *new class* reveals reproduction of past privileges. Majority of his respondents were overwhelmingly from landowning families[32] (Datta, 1991: 139). Also, the middle stratum that has emerged after the merger with India consisted not only of those relying on educational qualifications but also on other forms of capital. Along with the professionals, it also comprised of businesspersons, contractors, and politicians.

Regardless of the various routes for upward mobility that came up in the two decades after the merger, the most secure was the one leading to government employment. The early educated Sikkimese being inducted into the state administrative services in a rapid manner and the privileges that came with it, in a way, made government jobs highly desirable.[33] Moreover, for most of the people of Sikkim, the process "making it" in life had to be done

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[30] The Sikkimese author, Chetan Raj Shreshtha, in an interview with the Scroll.in, while explaining the premise of his novel, *The Light of His Clan*, comments on the overriding presence of the government in people's lives and livelihoods:

> Now the government in Sikkim employs a fifth of the adult population and coupled with disbursements and schemes, for it is also the primary industry, it supports a little over four fifths or eighty percent of the population. I don't know of anywhere in the world where these kinds of statistics occur. You can't escape the government, and by extension, you can't escape politics. I wanted to bring out the claustrophobia induced by such a situation in *The Light of His Clan*. (Sharma, 2016, para. 13)

[31] As per the census data, in 1971, only 9.4 per cent of the total population in Sikkim were living in urban areas compared to 25.15 per cent of the total population in the 2011 (Chhophel, 1974; Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).

[32] Datta's study, conducted in the late 1980s, shows that out of a total of 152 respondents, 108 respondents' families owned land ranging from 1acre to 20 acres and 33 of them came from families that owned over 20 acres of land. The number of respondents coming from landless families and families owning less than 1 acre of land were 7 and 4 respectively. (Datta, 1991: 139)

[33] I will be discussing this further in Chapter Six.

inside Sikkim. The *son of the soil* recruitment policy has been critiqued as being responsible for Sikkimese graduates studying outside returning home for "assured" jobs, in positions "lower than what they deserve" (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 60). The Sikkimese youth working outside the state are said to encounter "many forms of social and cultural insecurities" and are also seen as not being able "to compete in the globalized world" (GoS, 2015, p. xxix). Nonetheless, the need to stay back in or return to Sikkim for employment also needs to be understood in terms of the historical developments especially with respect to identity formation, political patronage, cultural and familial expectations, as well as demographic factors.

An increasingly globalising world and a large influx of outsiders into the state had led to the assertion of local identities and heightened emphasis on cultural heritage and the importance of the *uniqueness* of Sikkimese history (and the conditions under which the assimilation into the Indian Union had taken place). To add to that, the ruling and oppositional political parties have always emphasized a protectionist and welfarist image catering largely to the interests of the "Sikkimese" people. Hence, the act of working and living in the state is, to an extent, imbued with a sense of cultural pride and belongingness.

Another important factor that has possibly contributed to the younger generation opting to settle down in Sikkim is the changing demographic profile, household size and household structure within the state. As per the National Family Health Survey (NFHS) data, the state has shown a trend towards decreasing of both household size and fertility rate and increasing nuclearization of households [34]. Belonging to families with one or two offspring invariably adds to the pressure of settling down in one's place of origin, making employment within Sikkim a very important aspect to consider while charting future trajectories.

After the merger with India, widening of the opportunity structure and expansion of education, with certain protective measures in place, living in Sikkim presented promising prospects for the young people of the state. However, in the past three decades, with the much-desired public sector employment reaching its saturation point, there has been a rise youth unemployment and dissatisfaction (GoS; 2015, p. xxix). Chasing the dominant notion

[34] According to the NFHS data (International Institute for Population Sciences [IIPS], 2001; IIPS and Macro International, 2008; IIPS and Inner City Fund [ICF], 2018) there has been a progressive decline in the mean household size in Sikkim with the values of 5.4 (NFHS-2), 4.5 (NFHS-3), and 4.0 (NFHS-4). There has been a decrease of one child (1.6) in the 13 years between the NFHS-2 and NFHS-4. Total number of nuclear households in Sikkim shows a marked increase from 56.7 per cent (NFHS-2) to 60 per cent (NFHS-3) to 64.4 per cent (NFHS-4).

of success, showcased by the urban upper and middle classes, has not been easy for all. Increasingly, the political and administrative bureaucracy looms large over the public as a formidable patron and learning to navigate through it requires the possession of various privileges and *forms of capital* (Bourdieu, 1986), which are not evenly distributed in the society.

Privilege, Marginality, and Inequality in Sikkim

In Sikkim, the process of upward mobility (especially through education and political participation) and reproduction of old privileges, in some cases, has resulted in the formation of a relatively affluent section mostly concentrated in the capital town of Gangtok. Lama (2001, p. 16) states that, "the high per capita income *vis-à-vis* a very high poverty status implies that income distribution is very skewed in Sikkim. The coexistence of extremely affluent segments with the astonishingly poor over-whelming majority has been common to many States in the North-East." He further argues, "since most of poverty-stricken people are concentrated in the rural areas, the urban-rural gap, in terms of both distribution of income and asset creation, could emerge in a very precarious manner." In a way, despite many "achievements" (GoS, 2015, p. xxiv-xxviii), the "progress" and "development" of Sikkim has continued to maintain the gap between the rich and the poor, the urban and the rural, the politically astute and the politically alienated. This has important implications in the contemporary context of work and employment.

In the early 1990s, as the neoliberal market forces made its entry into India, Sikkim, with just a decade long experiment with democracy, had to simultaneously contend with major economic shifts. Private investment was encouraged by the ruling governments in the state by offering tax and other incentives (GoS, 2015, p. 8). Hydel-power projects, pharmaceutical companies, and breweries have set up their infrastructure along the riverbanks of Sikkim. Even tourism and the educational sector have witnessed the entry of several private parties. With most of the economic opportunities, basic amenities, and infrastructural projects being clustered in urban areas, especially the capital town of Gangtok, the districts and the remote areas have often been neglected (Lama, 2001: 3).

With the metrocentric focus of change, the capital town of Gangtok has emerged as the symbol of progress and development undertaken by the state. Based on my observations and personal interviews with the participants and other locals during the study, in the popular

imagination, Gangtok is the "success" story to be emulated by the rest of Sikkim.[35] A certain dominant ethos and way of life that has developed in Gangtok is characterized by a higher purchasing power and a consumerist lifestyle giving salience to visible markers of status and affluence. The democratic ideals of moving towards an egalitarian society and the pro-poor rhetoric of the political parties has, instead of encouraging the welfare and an equitable development of rural and urban areas, endorsed the homogenization of aspirations dictated by what Campbell and Yates (2011) call the "metrocentric" norms and values.

Although, about two-thirds of the state population are still living in rural areas and agricultural work is the primary occupation of the people[36] (as per the 2011 Census) there is an increasing desire to live and work in urban areas. With an increasing number of educated people looking for white-collar jobs, the tried and tested route of moving into secure government employment after acquiring some educational qualifications has become more difficult. The government, which is the largest employer in the formal sector, has, over the years, reduced the number of job openings (Planning Commission, 2008, p.58; GoS, 2015, p.10). Although Sikkim does show a high proportion of self-employed workers – higher than the average for the north-eastern states or the country (GoS, 2015, p.11) – the sustainability of such self-employment options requires closer study. Looking at the unemployment data on Sikkim, an issue of concern that arises is, of the total unemployed in 2006, almost 88 per cent were from rural areas (GoS, 2015, p.11). Thus, for majority of the people within the state, locational constraints are something that they have to contend with on a daily basis.

In Sikkim, being able to navigate the complex political and administrative terrain require a certain amount of social capital, which is more readily available to those with the right political affiliations, family, and kinship networks. The propertied class and those who have cultivated the right bureaucratic and political networks, have been able to make the most out of the modern (and now neoliberal) changes that Sikkim experienced from the 1970s onwards till date. The privileged and the marginal in Sikkim have been made through the

[35] This need to emulate the "urban" way of life as represented by Gangtok was highlighted by many in the field. One of the participants, a female school student, remarked, "Gangtok is really getting developed. There is a lot of difference between Gangtok and Rhenock people. They maintain a standard there and they treat people coming from other places in Sikkim as inferior…Right now people are so into fashion and all, the people in Gangtok are like that but I feel you should live according to what you have and not show off too much. The people in Rhenock are simple but once they go to Gangtok then they become like them only."

[36] Citing the 68th NSS Round (2011-12) data, 62 per cent of the total workers in the state are engaged by the primary sector (agriculture and allied services), while the remaining depend on the secondary and tertiary sectors (GoS, 2015, p. 9). However, there has been a decline in the number of young people opting for agriculture as they are looking for urban based employment opportunities (Planning Commission, 2008; GoS, 2015).

interplay of various factors. History adds a dimension of privilege by dictating the degrees of indigeneity and thereby, the entitlements and benefits accrued. Being a domiciled Sikkimese means having greater access to the much-desired public sector employment, and enjoying higher priority in acquiring the other benefits, goods and services distributed by government. For those without the domiciled status, the disadvantages thus faced can be overridden by the acquisition of economic capital through industry, business, and trade, as shown by the prosperous Marwari and Bihari families within the state. However, the non-domiciled and especially those engaged in precarious work lack the security enjoyed by the domiciled or the economically stable.

The next section locates the field area, the provincial town of Rhenock, within the various hierarchies of location, privilege and political patronage that characterize the Sikkimese context.

Borders, Trade Routes, Nurseries, and Schools: A Brief History of Rhenock

Rhenock lies in the eastern-most part of Sikkim along the border, with West Bengal in the south and Bhutan in the east. Starting from the late 1800s, with the onset of the Indo-Tibetan trade, Rhenock gained importance being located along the trade route from Kalimpong in West Bengal to the Jelep La pass in North Sikkim. The British Lieutenant-Colonel W.J. Buchanan toured Sikkim from 1910 to 1911. Upon descending from the British bungalow located in the village of Aritar, he writes the following about Rhenock:

> The important village of Rhenock is but 3 miles off down the hill, and as there is a post and telegraph office at Rhenock, it is convenient to arrange for letters and papers to await the travellers there. From Ari to Rhenock the road runs downhill; in about 20 minutes we pass a small railed in enclosure, which looks like a small cemetery. The road then becomes broad and almost level in places. Near mile-post 29 we pass the handsome house of a local Tikidar, quaintly called "D.T. Prodhan Cottage." Rhenock Post Office is reached 10 minutes later.
>
> Rhenock is an important centre and roads lead from there to Gnatong and to Pedong, north-west to Gangtok (*vid* Pakyong) and north-east to Gnatong. The bungalow (alt. 4,300 ft.: 2 rooms and 4 beds) is in the bazar and is little used. From Rhenock our road runs rapidly down to the Rishe river; it is steep and stony but shady. In half an hour the bridge is reached at the 26th mile-post; we cross over and enter British Bhutan or Kalimpong district. (Buchanan, 1916, p. 36)

Buchanan's excerpt points to the historical significance of the place. It also shows that Rhenock in the early 1900s had certain modern amenities, for instance, the *dâk* bungalows[37], which were built by the British in places under their administration. The passage also throws a little light on the dominance of the lessee landlords known as *thikedars* or "Tikidar" (above) from the Newari community[38], with the author mentioning the house belonging to one of them as a landmark in the area.

After 1861, the British started actively encouraging Nepali immigration into Sikkim, settling them down in the unoccupied lands. With a large influx of the Nepali immigrants, the older Lepcha and Bhutia inhabitants were soon reduced to a minority in Rhenock and many other places in Sikkim. This resulted in the emergence of two conflicting groups among the prominent Bhutia leaders from the landed aristocracy – one, pro-British favoring the Nepali immigration to Sikkim, and the other, pro-*Chogyal* and his supporters. The latter were threatened by increasing number of Nepali immigrants and the creation of few Nepali lessee landlords.[39] As a result of these developments, in 1880, Rhenock became a site of conflict between the two factions of the ruling Bhutia elites in the face of the increasing number of Nepali migrants (Coelho, 1967). The anti-immigration group forcefully tried to drive away the Nepali settlers in Rhenock. They failed, however, due to strong resistance from the Nepalis who were backed by the pro-immigration members of the ruling class and the British. This resulted in the Nepalis settling down in Rhenock in large numbers, alongside the older Lepcha and Bhutia inhabitants. It also led to the rise in the importance of Nepali *thikedars* or lessee landlords, mostly belonging to the Newar community. While the system of lessee landlordism was abolished after land reforms in 1951, prior to that, the place was largely under the control of the *thikedars* and *kazis*. Village headmen, who were given the title of "*mondals*," aided the *thikedars* and the *kazis* in their work of revenue collection. These groups still form the elite landowning class today, although many of them are absentee landlords.

[37] The *dâk* bungalows, as their name suggests, operated both as a post office and a lodging for British officials and travellers.

[38] The Newars in Sikkim have been said to have chosen the common surname "Pradhan" ("Prodhan" in the above excerpt) as their surname, to distinguish themselves from other communities as well as to bring solidarity within themselves (Shrestha, 2015: 35-37).

[39]The system of administration as it existed before, had the *Chogyal* at the top, assisted by a private secretary and attendants, looking over majority of the cases that come to his notice and the further devolvement of authority to the *dzongpens*, or the district officers, to look after their regional administration. The *kazis*, who were the Lepcha and Bhutia landowning nobility, and the *thikedars*, the more recent Nepalese landlords, were to manage the affairs in their own estates (Rose, 1978).

Due to its strategic location along the Indo-Tibetan trade route mapped out by the British, Rhenock was one of the earliest places in Sikkim to be opened to outside influences. With the constant streaming in of visitors from outside, Rhenock developed rapidly in the early 1900s. It has one of the oldest post-offices, police stations, and schools in the state.

The earliest floriculture business in Sikkim was also established in Rhenock, in 1910. It was owned by a Newari *thikedar* family, and it led to proliferation of more nurseries as the extended family branched out the business. These nurseries exported locally cultivated orchids and other varieties of exotic Himalayan flowers and plants to England and other countries in the west. The establishment of the post office in the early 1900s, aided the nursery business. Today, the floriculture business has declined as many of the large landowning families of Rhenock have moved to Gangtok and other places for education and urban employment.

The residences of these prominent Newari *thikedars* are still referred to, by the locals, as *kothis*, meaning big houses or bungalows in the Nepali language. Some of the *kothis* are still around, while others have been rebuilt or abandoned. The old structures are usually two-storied houses, largely made of wood and stone, built according to the Newari architectural style, with lawns in the front, surrounded by gardens and orchards. The bigger ones even have driveways leading to the house. Some are looked after by caretakers in the owners' absence. In one of the *kothis*, the walls are still adorned with the old swords that were used during the Nepali rebellion against the Bhutia ruling elites, and old photos of the visits made by important dignitaries, including the Chogyal and British officials to the property decades ago.

Rhenock, as a trading post, was traversed by travelers, missionaries, and traders all the way from the plains of British India (and beyond) on their way to the Tibetan plateau. Traders with mules and horses laden with goods stopped to rest and recover from their strenuous journey through the steep mountain tracks. This was where they hired laborers, replenished food stocks, and exchanged goods. Gradually, with the departure of the British and the subsequent border conflict between India and China, in 1962, the government put an end to the cross-border trade and closed the mountain passes. With this Rhenock retreated into anonymity. In the decades that followed, Rhenock settled down to the slow, village life that surrounded it. Rhenock being one of the first places in Sikkim to have encountered with modern changes, the locals still revoke the past with a sense of pride. Then again, for many,

the past was also a time of deprivation, scarcity, poverty, and exploitation by the landed elites.

Rhenock in Contemporary Times: People, Places and Settlement Patterns[40]

As per the 2011 Census, the Rhenock revenue block records a total population of 5,883 persons. Rhenock had a high number of Nepali "upper" caste communities[41], namely Bahuns and Chettris. Newars[42] (along with Lepchas and Bhutias) however, traditionally owned much of the land in the area and could be identified as one of the more dominant groups in Rhenock. Rhenock also had other communities who have been included in the larger Nepali conglomerate namely, Bhujels, Gurungs, Rais, Sunuwars and Thakuris.[43] In the 2011 Census, the scheduled tribes (comprising of Lepchas, Bhutias, Sherpas, Tamangs, Limboos) formed 14.81 per cent of the total population of Rhenock. Among the scheduled castes, the communities of Kamis, Damais and Sarkis lived in Rhenock. They comprised 10.15 per cent (597 persons) of the total population of Rhenock, which was the highest proportion of scheduled caste to the total population in all of Sikkim. (Directorate of Census Operations, 2011)

Rhenock also had a considerable number of Bihari and Marwari inhabitants, few of whom had settled here since the Indo-Tibetan border trade, while others were later migrants. Besides a few Newari and Bhutia families with small business establishments, older Bihari and the Marwari residents formed the major business community in the area. There was also a continuous influx of skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled workers primarily

[40] The descriptive account in the sections that follow are largely based on observations, interviews and informal interaction with participants and locals living in place.

[41]The upper castes among the Sikkimese Nepalis comprise of Bahuns (Brahmins), followed by the Chettris (who claim the Kshatriya status).

[42] Newars are an ethnic group who occupied and ruled over the Kathmandu valley prior to the rise of the Shah dynasty in Nepal (Pradhan, 1991/2009). The Newars have enjoyed a high status in Sikkim largely due to the efforts of the early settlers whose skill in minting coins and efforts at systematizing revenue collection won them favors with the Sikkimese king and consequently the British, making them the first among the Nepali settlers to become lessee landlords (Shreshtha, 2015). Rhenock is the one of the areas in Sikkim where the Newars have settled down and form a dominant ethnic grouping. They are *Sankritised* (Srinivas, 1956) to a great extent and consider themselves one among the "upper" castes in Rhenock. Newars in Nepal have their own version of the occupational caste-system within themselves but in Sikkim, owing to the need to display unity at the face of other dominant groups, they do not practice it strictly (see note 34 above).

[43] Many of them belong to the Kirati tribes that inhabited eastern Nepal before the Gorkha invasion, so are quite distinct in their customs and culture. Many of these groups fall under the centrally recognized other backward classes (OBCs). Some of them still practice animism. Many have adopted Hinduism and are *Sanskritised* to a greater or lesser degree, while some follow Buddhism or Christianity. They, however, still practice animism. They are also known as the *maatwali jaat*, due to their customary drinking of alcohol, in contrast to the upper castes' stipulated practice of teetotalism.

from West Bengal and Bihar. Apart from the Biharis and the Marwaris, Rhenock, being a border area between West Bengal and Sikkim, had a sizable proportion of persons and families who were from the nearby villages and towns of neighboring West Bengal.

While the Newars, the Bhutias and the Lepchas formed the traditional landowning class, over the years, the size of their landholdings had decreased due to subsequent land reforms and upward social mobility of people from other castes and tribes. This had enabled the latter to purchase small plots of land from the erstwhile landowners, to build houses or undertake small scale farming.

The Marwaris and the Biharis usually lived in the main bazaar in rented accommodations. More affluent members from these communities had built houses, on property bought on lease.[44] Much of the land in the bazaar belonged to the *thikedari* and a few Bhutia families. They usually let their bazaar property out for rent or lease to those living there. The Marwari and the Bihari families owned small to medium businesses in the town which included selling of hardware supplies, groceries, medicines, liquor, electronic appliances and home furnishing, clothing, and so on. They also provided various other services such as tailoring, repairing of electronic goods, shoemaking, barbering, and so on. They had kinship networks and extended family businesses outside Sikkim. The bigger business families supplied materials for construction purposes to individuals, government agencies, and to the army. Some of them also undertook small to large-scale contract work for the government, such as construction of buildings, temples, roads, bridges, etc. Many owned taxicabs and transport vehicles which serve the dual purpose of ferrying people to places within Sikkim and to the towns of West Bengal, along with carrying goods for their shops.

Although the Bihari and the Marwari communities had amicable relations with other ethnic groups in the area, they kept to their own traditions and customs. They often found themselves in a liminal status between being an "insider" and an "outsider." During my fieldwork, a Hindu-Bihari mother, who was worried about her daughter's marriage prospects, talked about her apprehensions:

> They (her daughters) were born and brought up here. It will be difficult for them to adjust to life back in Bihar. So, we will have to look for grooms who are from our caste but have been brought up in Sikkim or nearby places.

[44]Sikkim has strong laws protecting the land rights of the people of Sikkimese origin. See Thatal (2020) for details on prohibition of sale of land to the "plainsmen."

The “local” and “non-local” distinction was raised quite often in daily interaction and conversation among the residents. Even those from neighboring areas of West Bengal, despite belonging to the same ethnic groups (Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas) as the Sikkimese people, were often treated as “outsiders.” Oftentimes, within the same families, one would find some with the Sikkimese domicile and others without. There was also a high incidence of marriage across the borders. Many in Rhenock had extended family members in the neighboring areas of West Bengal. Hence, the characteristic of border towns and the distinction between the “locals” and the “non-locals,” although maintained sharply in situations where the question of entitlements attached to domiciled Sikkimese arose, were also, at other times, blurred and ambiguous.

Turning to a description of the physical landscape of Rhenock, the focal point of the entire area was the bazaar that connected numerous localities and villages that surrounded it. The main bazaar area was a flat stretch, consisting of the main road running between rows of shops on both sides. Taxis were parked in front of the shops. The shops sold groceries, electrical goods, fresh produce, fast food, home furnishings, construction materials, and so on. A few hotels were also located in the main bazaar area. In the middle of the bazaar stood the old post office housed in one of the older structures. Opposite the post office was a temple. The bazaar had a relatively large space on one side of the road, where religious, cultural, political, and official events were often held.

Below the bazaar was the village locality of Reshi, and towards the east, the village of Khamdong, both of which bordered West Bengal. As you followed the bazaar road further up, you came across the police station, the primary health center, and a junior high school, all located along the road. Opposite the junior high school, across the road, was a big, dilapidated building. This used to be a cinema hall. The older residents still reminisced about how they would hurriedly wrap up their household chores and rush to watch the latest Hindi films being screened at the cinema hall in the past. The road continued further up, through thick forests and few houses, to a missionary-run private school and then onward to the only senior secondary school in the area (the one chosen for the study). Right next to the school was an army camp, located amid a residential area known as Chalisey. Above the school was another residential locality called Kingstone. If you followed the road through Kingstone upwards, you reached Aritar which was famous for its lake, the Lampokhari. The government degree college (included in the study) was situated in a locality called

Rungdung[45] that was located below the senior secondary school and above the bazaar on the northwest side.

Below Rungdung was the village of Tarpin. Tarpin was located along the main road which led to Rorathang. Located in Rorathang and Kumrek (also near the river) were the Golden Cross Pharma Private Limited and the Cipla Manufacturing Plant, respectively. Both units belonged to the Chemical, Industrial & Pharmaceutical Laboratories or Cipla Limited. These two companies, at the time of study, provided largely skilled and semi-skilled jobs to many from Rhenock, Rongli and the surrounding areas.

Coming back to Rhenock, one could still see the scheme of past settlement patterns[46] in the area, with the Bhutias occupying most of the higher altitude localities above the bazaar area, especially in Aritar, and the Nepalis in the middle and lower altitudes. The Lepchas live interspersed with the other two ethnic groups and were mostly concentrated in the Rungdung area. However, over the years, most of the villages and localities in the Rhenock area, especially the bazaar, had become more multi-ethnic in its composition. Nevertheless, the dominant pattern of settlement was that of clustering together, based on kinship, caste, or community identities. This has been the general norm in the arrangement of hamlets and villages, not only in Rhenock but also across Sikkim.

The bazaar had the highest density of people living together. The business community, the landless, and the more recent migrants mostly lived in and around the bazaar area. Besides the bazaar area, the other localities were relatively less populated. The houses were mostly dispersed across the hills, broken in between by agricultural lands. Many houses had cowsheds next to them, some were, however, not in use or converted into storage spaces. Despite the encouragement of the state government, dairy farming in the area has declined over the years, largely due to the household members shifting to non-farming jobs. Agriculture[47] in the area had also declined. Although small vegetable plots adjoining the houses in the village localities could be seen, majority of the bigger fields were not under cultivation, and were overgrown with weeds and wild plants. With the

[45] In February 2013, the college shifted to its own campus right below its former location, however, within the same locality.

[46] Since the Sikkimese Bhutias occupied the higher altitude areas due to their preference for cooler climatic conditions, the Nepalis, who came in later, found the low-lying areas (and sometimes, difficult terrains), available for settling down.

[47] As per the Census 2011, out of the total workers (main and marginal) of 2,445 persons in Rhenock, there were only 154 cultivators and 244 agricultural laborers (main and marginal). Out of the total number of 154 cultivators, only 130 were main workers while 24 of them belonged to the marginal category, and out of the total number of 244 agricultural laborers, only 109 persons were engaged in full time work while135 of them were again marginal laborers (Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).

central government launching the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) in 2006, and the increased availability of other forms of work, the scarcity of agricultural workers to tend to the fields was a common problem. Despite the state government actively encouraging organic farming in Sikkim, in Rhenock, majority of the local, organically grown vegetables sold during the weekly *haat* came from the neighboring villages of West Bengal and nearby places in Sikkim. The bazaar vegetable shops also got their produce from Siliguri, which were widely consumed by the residents as they were considerably cheaper than what was grown locally.

There had been a rise in the number of concrete structures, commonly called "RCC (Reinforced Cement Concrete) buildings" or just "buildings", in the area. These new buildings belonged to the more affluent section of the population, usually government employees, political workers or office holders, contractors, and business owners. Some households with land to spare had the new structures built beside the main *ekra*[48] house of the past. Some of these new constructions were quite ostentatious and painted in the brightest shades of various colors. Some had their exterior walls covered with glossy tiles. Despite the embellishments, the common architectural style was the standard RCC frame structure – rectangular, multiple floors, with staircases built on the side of the house. Many of these buildings had the lower floors rented out to those who had come to Rhenock for work or education such as students, teachers, government and private sector employees, shopkeepers, and migrant workers.

The lower socio-economic section of the society lived either in rented spaces or in *kutcha* houses, scattered throughout the various localities of Rhenock. The Chief Minister's Rural Housing Scheme (CMRHS) was launched in 2010. Aimed at making Sikkim a "*kutcha* house free" state, it undertook the building of "model houses" costing about three lakh rupees each. The task of selecting families to be covered under the scheme was delegated to the *panchayats*. Party allegiances, domiciled status, and land registration of the beneficiaries was important to avail the scheme. Although only a few had benefited from the scheme, the aspirations for a *pucca* house were high among the people. Those yet to get their model house constructed, waited for their turn, voicing their demands at *gram sabhas* or during visits from political office holders.

[48]Traditional dwellings made of straw, bamboo, wood and mud.

Employment and Social Relationships

With population increase and shift towards non-agricultural economic activities, Rhenock can be seen as a site of transition and gradual urbanization. Despite the changing landscape, Rhenock still exhibited certain aspects of rural life especially with respect to community life. Cloke (2006) conceptualizes *rurality* in terms of social rather than geographical indicators. He writes:

> Rural society and rural space can no longer be seen as welded together. Rather, rurality is characterized by a multiplicity of social spaces overlapping the same geographical area, so while the geographic spaces of the city and the countryside have become blurred *it is in the social distinction of rurality that significant differences between the rural and urban remain* (emphasis added). (p. 19)

With certain shifts in the employment structure[49], the people in Rhenock can be said to be straddling the traditional and the modern. Historical differences between the ethnic groups, traditional hierarchy between the landed and the landless, and caste-based observances were getting blurred due to availability of new forms of employment, migration, and democratization of the political sphere. Yet, due to the preponderance of the "upper" castes among the Nepalis living in Rhenock, caste rules and regulations were often strictly adhered to in their daily lives. Many discriminatory practices were still prevalent.[50] While giving out houses for rent, the caste identity of the prospective tenants was often enquired. In many of the older households, food and water were given in separate utensils to members of the so-called "lower" sections of society and the latter avoided entering the house of those "higher" up.

The people from the "lower" castes and classes avoided discriminatory treatment by mapping out their social circles accordingly. Those who complied by these strict rules of purity and pollution or maintained class hierarchy, often found it difficult to get help for domestic chores or other household work. Another response from those subjugated within the traditional social hierarchy has been religious conversion. Earliest Christian converts in

[49] According to the 2011 Census (Census of India, 2011b), among 2,115 main workers cultivators and agricultural laborers comprised of only 130 and 109 persons respectively while an overwhelming majority of 1,831 persons were other workers. Similarly, from a total of 330 marginal workers, cultivators and agricultural laborers were only 24 and 135 persons respectively while other workers were 166.

[50] The prevalence of caste discrimination in Sikkim is something that is not often addressed in the public domain. An editorial of a local newspaper subtitled, "Much to Sikkim's shame, caste discrimination remains illegally in practice," reports the arrest of a 68-year-old for murder of a 24-year-old with a wooden beam in West Sikkim because "he belonged to a caste which the suspected murderer did not want crossing his hearth." It further notes, "Social get-togethers in most of rural Sikkim continue to observe caste segregation…." (Still Not Cast Away, 2015, p. 2)

Rhenock were largely Lepchas[51] (and so was the case in Sikkim at large). However, conversion of Nepalis to Christianity was also becoming quite common. Although it is beyond the scope and purpose of the present study, conversations with the residents revealed certain reasons for conversion to Christianity that highlights certain issues faced by those coming from the lower sections of society. Christianity was said to provide a feeling of unity for those who were marginalized by the larger society. In addition, it also offered an escape from the financially draining, strict ritual observances of Hinduism, and even Buddhism. Besides, many ostracized by the larger society because of marriage with members of the lower castes also chose to convert. Other reasons for conversion were alcoholism, family tragedies, and even health issues. Families with a member suffering from a chronic health problem, or addicted to alcohol or drugs, allowed for that member to adopt Christianity, while the other members within the family remained Hindus or Buddhists.

Coming to the question of social classes in Rhenock, in the past, as discussed earlier, at the top of the social hierarchy were the *kazis* and the *thikedars* and at the bottom the tenant farmers, and the landless laborers. Within the land labor relations, the *kut* and *adhiya*[52] forms of tenancy were highly prevalent in Rhenock, binding the erstwhile tenants and their families to till the land for generations. In the early 1900s, with the gradual expansion of the modern administrative system, few gained mobility into the service class, working for the state durbar as village *mondals*, forest guards, postal workers, policemen, teachers, and other lower-level appointees. With land reforms and abolition of lessee landlordism in the 1950s, owner-cultivators with small land holdings (of less than 5 acres) also emerged from the older peasant class who had managed to acquire land from the government or from the landowning class. Due to the rising demand for democracy and establishment of the *Panchayati Raj* institutions, a new class of village level political leaders emerged. Simultaneously, the in-migration from various parts of India brought in the Marwari and Bihari business class. With the merger of Sikkim with India, the rural areas saw major changes. With the opening up of modern employment opportunities, many migrated from the rural areas to the urban places, especially to the capital town of Gangtok.

[51] McKay (2007) writes about that the early Lepcha converts in Rhenock, as early as 1906, when "dispensaries staffed by local Christian compounders had been opened at Rhenock, Sriyong and Dentam." (p, 93) These compounders had been trained in modern medicine by the Scottish Mission in Kalimpong.
[52] See note 12 above.

In Rhenock, the earliest to get education in schools, and later join the modern forms of occupation, were largely from the landowning families. They went on to become bureaucrats, professionals, and political leaders in Sikkim. The children of those who belonged to the middle strata of lower-level government appointees (village level workers), independent farmers, traders, businesspersons, or local level political leaders gradually followed suit. A large majority of the tenant farmers and the landless, however, stayed at the margins of these earlier developments. Their participation in education and modern mobility pathways can said to have started late, in the preceding two decades or so.

As in the rest of Sikkim[53], even in Rhenock, there is a higher representation of the upper castes and the dominant ethnic groups in education, state government employment and ownership of landed property. Also, the ones having a domiciled status in Sikkim were more likely to be absorbed in some form of employment in the public sector. This was becoming the case more so with the state government adopting the "son of soil" policy more strictly in its recruitment process due to the growing number of educated locals. Hence, as elsewhere in the state, in Rhenock too, having some landed property, coming from the dominant caste or ethnic groups, and possessing the Sikkimese domiciled status did lead to greater access to the benefits of modern education and employment opportunities.

Post 1980s, with the democratization process in full swing in the state, many in Rhenock have escaped the ties that bound them to the old status quo, mostly through acquisition of modern education and subsequent government and other forms of employment. They can be called the emerging *rural middle classes*. Many of the educated, upwardly mobile joined the government services at various levels of administration– as peons, drivers, policemen, office clerks, administrative staff, and bureaucratic officials. Some were also professionals working as teachers, doctors, and engineers. While a few

[53] In Sikkim, as per the State Socio Economic Census [SSEC] 2006 (DESME, 2006), the social category wise literacy rates shows that the literacy rates were the highest for the "Others" (non-domiciled residents of Sikkim) category at 85.66 per cent, followed by the state OBC category (consisting of the Newars, Bahuns and Chettris, who fall under the general category in the central list) at 82.52 per cent, the state MBCs (which corresponds with the central list OBCs with the exception of the Dewan community) at 79.71 per cent, the STs at 79.38 per cent, and finally the SCs at 77.47 per cent. Looking at the data for individual communities, the Newars and the Bahuns were ranked as the second and fourth highest literate community at 85.76 and 85.26 per cent respectively, the first being the Dewan community from the MBC category at 95.32 and the third being the Others. Besides the Dewan community, most of the community who rank low in literacy rates come from the SC, MBC and ST categories with Sarkis, belonging to the scheduled castes, ranking the lowest at 71.07. Thus, looking at the above literacy rate, there does seem some correspondence between caste and educational status in Sikkim.

were posted in Rhenock, others lived in their place of work, visiting Rhenock whenever possible. The business families, contractors, entrepreneurs, and the managers employed by new established private companies were also part of this middle class. Besides state government employment, many families in Rhenock have members who have joined the Indian army. A few also work for the local branch offices of central government agencies like Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) and the Central Bank of India (CBI), at the lower and mid-level positions. Some have made their fortunes by joining politics, starting their own businesses, or working as contractors, taking up various development work undertaken by the state government. This emergent middle class had invested in property in the bazaar area, and in other localities. Many of them owned buildings to be given out for rent to the increasing number of students, teachers, government employees and private company employees coming from outside. Some of them ran low-cost primary schools, computer institutes, and hostels in their property. They also rented their road level floors to small shopkeepers.

While the upwardly mobile benefitted from the rapid change post-merger, many still belonged to the lower socioeconomic category. They comprised of the poorer peasant households who still lived in small *kutcha* houses on plots given to them by their old landlords or in rented accommodations. While they lived there, they were obligated to look after the landlord's property in the latter's absence, help with household chores, and, if required, work on the gardens and fields of the landowners for daily wages. The lower classes also included the new migrant workers who came from other states of India and even neighboring countries like Nepal. They were primarily engaged in construction work, and other semi-skilled and unskilled jobs in the area.

With the decline of agricultural activities and the increasing movement of agricultural workers into non-farming employment sector, there had been a shift in the old agrarian relations. Very few continued to cultivate the land under the old *kut* or *adhiya* system. The women, by and large, had joined the NREGA. They were also members of local self-help groups (SHGs). Some of the women also engaged in selling vegetables, milk, and poultry to supplement their monthly income. The semi-skilled and the skilled workers were either self-employed or did contract based work as masons, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, and mechanics. Many of the young men opted to become taxi-drivers. They either worked for owners of taxis or bought their own vehicles taking loans from the banks. The unskilled mostly undertook construction work as the wages were much higher than that

of agricultural work. Some opened teashops and small eateries near offices, schools, and the college, catering to office workers, students, and teachers.

In many of the low-income families, the younger generation had taken up other jobs nearby or in the more urban locations in the state and outside. The more educated among them, worked as lower-level government employees (mostly on contractual basis), primary schoolteachers in low-cost private schools, or in the nearby private companies in and around Rhenock. Outside Rhenock, they often went to Gangtok, Siliguri, Kalimpong and even the metropolitan cities of India, to work in hotels, beauty parlors, shops, and business establishments, mostly in the service industry. Some of the younger women and men from Rhenock had also migrated to the countries in the Middle East looking for low skilled and semi-skilled jobs.

With a large part of the landowning elite, the emerging middle classes, and the younger working population migrating outside for work and better opportunities, Rhenock was still home for those who had job postings there, were engaged in marginal occupations, were unemployed, were non-workers such as students, housewives and the elderly. As Wierenga (2011, p. 371) states, "Rural towns are made up of people who want to be here, people who need to be here and people who want to get out." In an urban-centric world, they largely constitute what Corbett (2007) refers to as the ones who got "left behind."

Rurality and the Village Community

The traditional ways of life, although under pressure, displayed a certain resilience in how the local people structured their social life. The community ethos and values of village life were upheld despite the disillusionment and frustration of being rural in an increasingly metrocentric world. Just as the rapid change brought about by democratization and modernization of Sikkim has favored some sections of society over others, certain places have gained more than the rest. The lopsided development that has taken place in Sikkim has given undue importance to the capital town of Gangtok. The problems and issues of living in Rhenock were like those faced by the rural areas across the country – bad roads, erratic supply of electricity, water shortage, lack of quality health care services, low quality education and poor redressal of public grievances. Rhenock, being a border area faced various social problems owing to its location. Suicides (especially among the youth), drug addiction, alcoholism, and premature deaths from neglected heath conditions were quite

common in the place.[54] The local people self-designated Rhenock as the "suicide capital of Sikkim." Easy access to drugs and alcohol was another issue that presented a myriad set of problems for the locals. Pharmaceutical drugs, mostly potent painkillers, which were not available over the counter, were allegedly smuggled in from outside through the borders. Besides drug addiction, alcoholism among the young and the old was another major problem. Selling of liquor was considered one of the most profitable businesses in the area. Many of the hotels and eating places served liquor. Besides the liquor selling shops and establishments in the bazaar area, there were also houses strewn across all localities where the locally brewed alcohol was illegally sold.

The slow economy of the place, outmigration for work and low employment opportunities resulted in large number of those who were unemployed or marginally employed. For the unemployed, time often stood still. Men collected in clusters outside small shops and tea stalls, playing carrom, and chatting about the latest political or local news. Some of these teashops had rooms inside for those who wanted to gamble and drink.

What comes through is that confronted by various risks, living precariously in a place characterized by "loss" (Kelly, 2009) the locals constructed a culture around what was available in front of them. Any occasion to come together in a meaningful manner was constantly sought out for. Community events, thus, were significant and taken very seriously.

The ecology and the natural resources of the place was integral to the social relationships between people. Due to the sub-tropical climate, there were thick forests and vegetation. Bamboo grew abundantly in the area, along with wild fig trees, cotton trees, needle woods, and rhododendrons. People borrowed or loaned bamboo from each other for construction of makeshift structures during funerals, weddings, or other occasions. The branches and leaves of the wild fig trees were fed to the cows, and the landowners bartered it to dairy farmers for manure. The neighbors had access to the uncultivated land to forage for grass, mushrooms, water cress, fiddlehead ferns, and wild herbs. People with spring water source in their land often shared the water with other households.

The sharing of resources, however, was not without its own set of problems or complexities. Neighbors squabbled over broken water pipes. Often, people had to pay money to get bamboo or animal fodder. The close social distance between the people manifested itself in various ways, some pleasant and others not so.

[54] Based on my ethnographic experience and interviews with the locals and study participants.

Weddings and, more so, funeral preparations, of family, friends, and neighbors were very important occasions in Rhenock. In case of death, the entire community came forward to help the bereaved family. The funeral rites lasted for many days and sometimes, in case of Buddhists, many weeks. During a funeral, for as long as the observances go on, every day, the family received a stream of visitors. Besides the preparations for the religious rites in which the family and close relatives were engaged, there was the added work of ensuring the visitors were offered refreshments upon arrival and a full meal before leaving. Be it a funeral or a wedding, the role of the *samaj*[55]was very important. The *samaj* provided the family with collectively owned furniture, tents, utensils, crockery, cutlery, etc., and the members came together to assume various responsibilities for the entire period of the family event.

Besides wedding and funerals, the other major social event was the *purans*, wherein Hindu priests gave religious sermons. The event lasted for days at length. It was very important for the local Hindus to attend these, and they gathered at the place of the event almost every day to listen to the sermons. There was high value attached to who would be the organizing the event. Local groups – consisting of panchayat leaders, social activists, and SHG members – would often compete to hold the event. These groups were divided along political lines, with each boasting of patronage from various political leaders. Usually, the ones backed by the ruling party or the one with the most influential patron would triumph. It was often followed by talk of alleged misuse of funds and improper management of the event among the rival groups.

Intermarriages and close ties between members of different caste groups (and even ethnic communities) were not preferred though not uncommon. Among the upper caste groups, the boundaries were quite strongly maintained. Here, the caste or community associations played an important role in emphasizing solidarity within the community and marking the boundaries stringently.

The way many of the locals discussed each other gave an impression to the listener that the relationships between people were often rife with underlying conflict and tension. Caste stereotypes were frequently brought up in evaluating people and their actions. Gossip was often borderline malicious. Intimate details of people's lives were local knowledge. As Kumar (2014, p. 38) writes, "Life in a village is lived, not just metaphorically but literally

[55] An association based on caste or ethnic group or locality that was supported by the collective contribution (in terms of money and in kind) of its members.

under the gaze of other residents who comprise the community." Rarely anything about others were private, overlooked or forgotten. Issues of inequality and competition between the locals were prominent in their perception of the surrounding locality. "This place is full of jealousy" stated Deepa, a thirty-two-year-old woman, a NREGA worker, with two children, "Nobody wishes the other to do well. But then again, what else can one do? The rich keep getting richer, and people like us stay as we are." She had a look hardened by many disappointments, a look that harbored no expectations, or hope, from the place and the people living there. Glimpses of the same look of disillusionment were also sometimes seen on the faces of the young.

Mines and Yazgi (2010, p.11) argue for the importance of the village in how people form identities. The social significance of the village life, although in transition, was still palpable among the local people. The local community life, however, was not all about people coming together bound by harmonious relations. Competition, malice, and bitterness would inevitably creep at the face of inequality, scarce resources, and disillusionment. Due to changes in the local employment structure and increasingly urban-centric aspirations of the people, Rhenock, like the rest of the rural areas in the country, was considered, as Gupta, (2005, p. 752) describes, "no longer a site where futures can be planned".

Conclusions

The politico-historical context of Sikkim makes the state an interesting case to look at. Sikkim projects the image of a "success" story. With a rather late entry into the Indian Union and with it, a rapid modernization process of the society has turned it into a state with one of the highest per capita incomes in the country. However, this chapter tries to highlight that Sikkimese society has in the past and continues to be divided along the lines of ethnic identity, economic privilege, political patronage, and location. The modern developmental process has accentuated the hierarchies that were already there and have also created newer ones.

Within this context, we look at Rhenock, a site of historical significance, which owing to its rural location and a growing aspiration of moving toward the urban direction, like the rest of Sikkim, finds itself at the crossroads – of tradition and modernity, of past and present, of problems and hopes. The young people growing up in a place like Rhenock had to balance the pessimism of local perceptions with the promise of modern education and changing employment options. Before we seek to understand what goes on in the lives of young people in Rhenock with respect to education and work, it is important to provide an

outline of education in Sikkim. Thus, in the next chapter we give a brief historical background and the trajectory of growth of education in Sikkim. Then we move on to discuss the educational context in Rhenock, thereby introducing the two main sites of the study, the school, and the college, followed by a brief profile of the student participants.

CHAPTER THREE
The Educational Contexts

This chapter attempts to contextualize the school and the college included in the ethnography within the larger context of education in Sikkim. First, it looks at the growth of modern education in Sikkim. We try and highlight that the state, besides making huge strides in the educational sphere, especially after its merger with the Indian Union in 1975, has had to contend with the issues of unequal schooling, prioritization of access over quality, and lack of coherent planning and policy making. We also argue that these issues are amplified for those accessing education in the rural areas or are from marginal social groups. In the second part of the chapter, we present a brief introduction to the institutions and the profile of the students under study.

Mapping Education in Pre-merger Sikkim

As mentioned in the Chapter Two, the growth of modern education in Sikkim has, to a great extent, been influenced by the early development of formal education in the Darjeeling region. The British-Indian policies on education, and, subsequently, the policies and schemes of Independent India further influenced the direction of growth of the educational system in Sikkim.

Historically, the strong hold of Tibetan culture and religion on Sikkim from the 17th to the 19th century was clearly apparent in the educational system, which was mainly a Buddhist monastic one (Lama, 2001). The theocratic state had the active role of prominent monks in its formation and subsequent administration. Therefore, monastic education enjoyed state patronage and prominence during the pre-British phase of Sikkimese history. High status was accorded to the persons training to be monks (*lamas*) and even higher to the ones who were recognized as reincarnate *lamas* or *tulkus*. However, the dominance of the monastic order and that of monastic education declined with gradual process of secularization, starting from the early 1900s, and, to a large degree, with the decline of the theocratic rule in Sikkim in the 1970s (Vandenhelsken, 2003).

After Sikkim became a British protectorate state in 1890[56], the British established a political office in the town of Gangtok, making it the capital, and appointed a political officer to oversee both the external and internal affairs of the small kingdom. The British, from the

[56] From 1890 -1918 the British Political Office took over the political and administrative control of the place, temporarily reducing the local ruler into a figurehead.

beginning, saw to it that the heir apparent of the ruling family was introduced to modern education, as they had done elsewhere in the other princely states of India. The obvious incentive for the colonial power was that a local ruler fluent in the English language and the British ways of doing things made the task of administration easier and aligned with their interests (see McKay, 2003). Besides the education of the ruler, introducing modern education to the sons (and later, daughters) of prominent Sikkimese families, mostly belonging to the land owning *kazis* and *thikedars*, was another motivating factor to the growth of schools in the capital town of Gangtok.[57]

The Scandinavian and Scottish missionaries coming into Sikkim via Darjeeling, set up several schools in the region.[58] In the neighboring Darjeeling, where missionaries had started schools from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, Reverend William Macfarlane was instrumental in devising an "Anglo-vernacular" system of basic education which taught "reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and a little geography, and a very little science" (O'Malley, 1907: 172). The establishment of missionary schools, though an earlier development than the state sponsored schools[59], mostly provided elementary education to rural children.

After the shift of power over internal administration back to the king in 1918, the educational institutions and monasteries came under the direct control of the Judicial Secretary along with the affairs of the courts and jails (Rose, 1978). There was a slow but steady rise in the demand for education from the grassroots in Sikkim in the late 1930s onwards. Here again, the demand for education needs to be understood under the larger context of rapid development of education in British ruled Darjeeling. With some from Sikkim migrating to Darjeeling and receiving formal education, and many newly educated persons coming in from Darjeeling, there was a motivation among the early educated to improve the condition of the villagers through education. These individuals, with the

[57] In 1906 and 1907, the government established the Bhutia Boarding School and the Nepali Boarding Schools, respectively (Lama, 2001). These two schools started by giving vernacular education and slowly incorporated the English curricula. In 1925, the Bhutia Boarding School and the Nepali Boarding School was merged and named the Tashi Namgyal High School, equivalent to a high school in British India and recognized by Calcutta University and managed by the *durbar* (Dewan, 2012). The students enrolled in the high school largely came from the Gangtok area and the Sikkimese land owning families (Bentley, 2011). Also, the families who could afford it or those living in close proximity to the towns of British Darjeeling were also sending their children to the schools there.

[58] According to the *Annual Administrative Report for the Year 1922-23* (GoS, 1923), out of a total of 30 schools in Sikkim, 7 were state-funded and 13 were missionary schools (11 belonged to the Scottish Mission while two were run by the Scandinavian Mission).

[59] As early as 1881, the Scandinavian Mission, with the help of a recent Christian convert, Gombu Lama, had started the first school in Sikkim at Phambong (Dewan, 2012).

patronage of the local *kazis*, *thikedars* or other benefactors, were establishing village primary schools to impart basic literacy and numeracy skills to the children, with teachers brought in from the Darjeeling region. The increasing bureaucratization of the administrative system and the rise of political parties in Sikkim also provided another impetus for the rise in the demand for education (Bentley, 2011). The early schools had their share of problems with low enrolment, fluctuating attendance of the students, lack of funding, opposition from the land-owning families, haphazard curriculum, and the inability to retain teachers due to rather arbitrary nature of renumeration and tenure arrangements (Dewan, 2012). Due to the largely agrarian basis of the local social structure and oppressive work conditions, modern education for most people from the agricultural and laboring classes was perhaps seen as a mere novelty rather than a necessity. Also, the early administration of education in Sikkim was unorganized with no coherent policy or direction. The British sparked an interest in English education among the local elites, leading to some early state-sponsored schools being established in Gangtok. The local ruler further devolved the responsibility of opening of village primary schools to the whims of the local landlords and private efforts[60]. Although the Christian missions started elementary schools in some villages, there was, however, no intention or funding for the development of these schools to higher levels of education[61].

In 1945, the First Inspectorate of Education was established in Sikkim, marking the intention of the *durbar* to assume more responsibility toward the progress of modern education. This development in Sikkim coincides with the *Sarjent Report of 1944* in post-war India, highlighting stronger commitment of the government towards providing universal, compulsory, and free elementary education, and the need for adult literacy. In education, there were gradual upgradation of few government schools in Gangtok into high schools, but the village and missionary schools, as pointed above, operated under minimum conditions.

The major impetus for growth of education in Sikkim came from the pro-democracy political movement of 1947, which was inspired by the Indian Independence Movement and the ideology of the Indian National Congress Party. [62] Another immediate political

[60] Little (2010: 5) points out that in the Indian context, despite the primary education acts in 1920 and 1930, much of the responsibility for education of the masses was placed in the hands of the local authorities of the provinces. The same was the case in Sikkim.

[61] The early British policy, as outlined in the Indian Education Commission of 1882, clearly highlights the limiting of government's duty to primary education, leaving the secondary and higher education largely to private parties. This could have been a major contributing factor for the rise of primary education across Sikkim without any plans for developing them into high schools.

[62] For the first time, a movement from the grassroots challenged the traditional authority of the theocracy, and the oppression under the dominant landowning elites (Basnet, 1974). With India's intervention, the political agitation was contained by reinstating a type of democratic set-up, whereby a dyarchic system of administration

development, the Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950[63], also provided the much-needed funding for education in the state. Sikkim showed some expansion of primary schools during this phase as it came under the ambit of planned economic development[64] as a protectorate of India. To better manage the education related affairs, a separate department of education was established in 1954. In 1963, the District Education offices were started, and each district of Sikkim was given an inspector.

With the sudden inflow of funds from the Government of India, many erstwhile private and missionary schools were recognized as government schools. New schools were started in the villages. Financial aid and teachers were provided to the existing ones. All the schools were brought under the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Some efforts at regulating the appointment of teachers were made by fixing the eligibility criteria and recruitment process. The government charged nominal fees from the students, but gradually, tuition fees for primary education was removed (Dewan, 2012). The expansion was highest at the primary level, and lower at the upper sections.[65]

To address the problem of trained teachers, a teacher-training institute for primary teachers was established in 1955. It trained the teachers along the lines of Gandhi's Wardha Scheme of basic education (Dewan, 2012). The medium of instruction was Nepali till class VI and then English from VII and above. In 1962, the medium of instruction was changed to English starting right from class I. Without the provision of well-trained English teachers and a well-formulated curriculum, the sudden shift to English as the sole medium of instruction was not to the advantage of the first-generation learners. The problem of proficiency in

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was introduced, and the elected members of the state council were put in-charge of certain departments, which included education.

[63] The Indo-Sikkimese Treaty of 1950 retained the status of Sikkim as a protectorate state of India. An Indian official, given the title of *Dewan*, was appointed to help the Maharaja of Sikkim (*Chogyal*) with the internal affairs of the state. It became the obligation of the newly Independent India under Nehru's leadership and idealism, to uphold the values of social justice and democracy in its protectorate state. The new phase under newly Independent India ushered in many positive changes for the rural population, such as, abolition of lessee landlordism and the practice of forced labor, setting up of *panchayats* in the village level and more systematic organization of administration at the district and local level.

The democratic quality of the new political set-up is, however, highly debatable. The early reformative measures were countered by the consolidation of power into the hands of the *Chogyal* and the *Dewan*. Elected members were reduced to mere officeholders, the potential of the political movement from the grassroots was eroded by divisions based on ethnicity, villagers were still compelled to till the fields of the landlords without any proper guidelines for tenancy rights, and the village *panchayats* were ineffective bodies without any executive functions or powers (Basnet, 1974; Rose, 1978).

[64] The Planning Commission of India laid down the first Seven Year Plan (1954-61) for Sikkim with an outlay of 324 lakh rupees, out of which, 7.4 per cent, amounting to almost 24 lakh rupees, was allotted for education (Lama, 2001).

[65] According to Thulung (1998), (as cited in Dewan, 2012: 242), in 1960, there were a total of 110 schools – 6 high schools, 13 junior high schools, 53 primary schools and 38 lower primary schools – in Sikkim.

English language, especially in rural government schools, continues till date. Proficiency in English has a large impact on the overall learning levels of the students. Pratham (2015) highlights that the learning outcomes of students in the rural areas of Sikkim show higher declining rates than the national average.

One major problem faced in Sikkim was the shortage of qualified and trained teachers. Despite the customary prestige given to the teacher within the village, for the few educated persons of Sikkim, the lure of recruitment to a bureaucratic position within the expanding administrative system would prove stronger than opting to become a village teacher (Datta, 1991). So, to meet the shortage of teachers in the expanding educational scenario, teachers from the neighboring Darjeeling region and other parts of India were encouraged to work in the schools in Sikkim. With the introduction of the Sikkim Subjects Regulation in 1962 there was adoption of son-of-the-soil policy regarding employment within Sikkim. People coming from outside were offered employment largely on temporary basis. This made it less desirable for qualified teachers to apply for jobs inside Sikkim. The poor infrastructure of the village schools, bare minimum salaries, temporariness of employment status, and increasing politicization of the local school management committees (SMCs) have been highlighted as some of the problems faced by teachers in Sikkim (Dewan, 2012).

Certain issues that characterized this period of educational development have left its mark on the state of education in Sikkim till date. The first is concerning the *ad hocism* that plagues the functioning of the various government departments, including education. The early developments in education indicate that the impetus for growth of education and the subsequent systematization of administration that took place was largely due to the sudden availability of funds and the pressure to utilize it. India too was grappling the issues of developing a well-informed policy and had no template to provide for its protectorate state. In Sikkim, beside the rather abstract aim of ensuring social justice by democratizing education, there were no well-thought-out policies that would suit the ground reality of the people and the place. The absence of a State Policy on Education was pointed out in the *Integrated Audit of the Human Resources Development Department of Sikkim*, carried out by the Comptroller Auditor General [CAG] as recent as 2009 (CAG, 2009). Despite the recommendations in the above report, there has been no formulation of such a policy till date. The early administrators of education also had to battle the power dynamics at the top, which involved conflict at all

levels.[66] In addition, the difficult terrain, poor connectivity, and communication network of Sikkim made it difficult to monitor, evaluate and expand education.

Post-merger Phase of Rapid Expansion and Unequal Growth

With Sikkim's merger with the India Union in 1975, the next phase of educational development was about catching up with the developments in rest of the country. In 1971, the literacy rate in Sikkim was only 17 per cent. There was a huge need for expansion of the educational system at all levels, to increase access to educational facilities for all sections of society. Similarly, various parts of India were also battling with the same issues. Despite the recommendations of the Kothari Commission, the National Policy of Education (NPE), 1968, continued with an emphasis on increasing access, rather than focusing on quality.[67] This nationwide trend of equating access with quality has, time and again, plagued the political decision-making in education in Sikkim, whereby the ruling governments have given more focus on announcing the establishment of newer and newer institutions, without proper planning, monitoring or evaluation of such projects (see CAG, 2009).

Sikkim, unlike many other major States within the Indian Union[68], has readily implemented the policies coming from the center. The engagement and dialogue of the state representatives with the central government over the matters of education has been missing in large measure. In 1977, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and National Council for Educational Research and Training (NCERT) pattern of education was introduced

[66] The government departments, from the earliest days of their inception, have had their share of problems regarding their functioning. First, the lack of coordination due to the chaotic system of diarchy; centralization of power by the *Chogyal* and the *Dewan* (appointed by the Indian government); the constant infighting amongst the elected members and the government officials over jurisdiction; and the communal overtone of politics, certainly added to arbitrary nature of administration of the government departments (Rose, 1978).

[67] The Report of the Education Commission 1964-66, popularly known as the Kothari Commission, recommended restrained expansion, increased regulation, and phase wise development of the educational institutions, and most importantly, 6 per cent of the GDP to be allocated to education to meet even the most basic goals set forth. However, what followed was the National Policy of Education (NPE) 1968, the first ever national policy in the history of education in independent India, which was a "watered down version" (Mathur, 2001, p. 231) of the Kothari Commission Report. It was ambiguous regarding terms of operationalization, time frames and implementation. It entirely left out the part on financing of education, which was the main axis on which rested. The issue of funding was a difficult one to resolve with the country undergoing a severe economic crisis during the time. The issue of equality of opportunity in education was more important for a highly unequal society rather than the allegedly "elitist" nature of quality control measures suggested by the Kothari Commission, which promoted the establishment of model schools, major universities, and selective admission criteria for higher education.

[68] School education, within the Indian federal structure, has been largely the responsibility of state governments. It was only with the 42nd Amendment of the Indian Constitution in 1976 that both the central government and the states have been given the shared responsibility of school education. Many larger states in the country have consistently contested the authority of the Central government over educational issues especially regarding medium of instruction and implementation of a uniform curricula (see Ayyar, 2017).

in the state's government schools. Many recommendations of the Kothari Commission and the NPE 1968, such as the common pattern of 10+2+3 for school and undergraduate studies, and the three-language formula were also adopted. In 1978, the state legislature passed the Sikkim Board of School Education Act, 1978, "to provide for the establishment of a Board of School Education to prescribe curricula, text-books and other instructional materials for schools and to conduct examinations at the school level in the State of Sikkim."[69] The state board, State Institute of Education (SIE)[70], which was subsequently established in 1978-79, however, has been mostly concerned with the task of writing and preparing of textbooks for the primary classes. A large part of the curriculum adopted by the state board follow the NCERT format. The autonomous role envisioned for the state boards by the NPE 1986, to engage in academic research to aid policy making for the states, and, to some extent, by the Sikkim Board of School Education Act 1976 has been largely missing in the case of the state board of Sikkim.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the state had to face a major challenge regarding retention of children in school, at both the primary and secondary levels. The total dropout rate in the year 1981-82 was 63.6 per cent in classes I to V which declined to 48 per cent in 1992-93 and 99.1 per cent in classes I to VIII which are much higher than the national average (GoI, 2008). Although, the state government has reported a huge decline in the drop-out rates by the early 2000s. The state government's Education Department, renamed Human Resource and Development Department (HRDD) in 2004, has reported marked improvement in the drop-out rates in the early 2000s. In 2005, the total drop-out rate was 15.22 per cent in classes I to V and 22.39 per cent in classes I to VIII (GoI, 2008, see Table 5.11). These figures, however, do not match those reported by the *CAG Report of 2009*. The *Report* tabulates that for the students who were enrolled in the year 2000 in class I showed a dropout rate of 42 per cent by the time they reached class V and the dropout rate of students enrolled in class I in 2003 was 36 per cent by the time they reached class V (CAG, 2009). Although the school enrolment has increased greatly in Sikkim, the inability to retain students in school is a worrying trend. Another major issue faced during the early decades after the merger was the shortage of qualified teachers. GoI (2008, p 81-82) highlights the low educational qualifications of the local Sikkimese, availability of "other attractive" employment options, "son of the soil" recruitment policy, lack of teacher training facilities as some of the reasons contributing to the

[69] See the Legislative Department Notification No.18/LL/78 dated 26th September 1978.
[70] It was converted to the Sikkim Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) in 2011.

issue of teacher shortage.

In 1994, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), under the leadership of Pawan Chamling, was elected as the ruling party, marking the beginning of this party's long (25 years) period of governance. The political stability, owing to the one-party rule, resulted in quite a few developments in various sectors. Sikkim, during this period, became a popular state in the media, winning numerous awards in education, rural development, agriculture, tourism, and environment sectors. The Times of India Group awarded Sikkim with the 'Best State in Education' in the year 2004, 2005, 2009, the 'Best State in Primary Education' in 2008, and the 'Best Small State in Education' in 2012 (DESME, 2015, p. 163).

Many of the educational indicators in Sikkim in the past two decades show marked improvement. There has been a huge increase in the overall literacy rates. In 1981 the total literacy rate in Sikkim was 34 percent which increased to 82 per cent in 2011. By 2011-12 there was a total of 1,236 schools in Sikkim[71] out of which 902 were government schools and 333 were private schools (National University of Educational Planning and Administration [NUEPA], 2012) Out of the total enrolment of 126,542 students 99,558 were enrolled in government schools and 26,060 in private schools (NUEPA, 2012). GoS (2015) claims that the enrolment in primary and upper primary schools was "near universal, with net enrolment ratios being highest in India" (p. 18).

Despite the many accolades and achievements, concerns about the quality of education in Sikkim, especially in government schools, have been raised (GoI, 2008; CAG, 2009). School education in India, at large, has been often critiqued for its emphasis on increasing access paying less heed to the quality of education offered. Ramachandran (2016: p, 90) blames this tendency on the "growing pressure to meet globally accepted levels of school enrolment." She further states that, "Issues of access and quality were analytically separated and the focus shifted to somehow getting children into schools with the belief that government could worry about quality later" (p. 90). A similar trend is seen in the case of Sikkim as well. The emphasis on increasing student enrolment has resulted in rapid expansion of schools. However, poor infrastructure, inefficient management and the absence of monitoring mechanisms have affected the quality of education offered in the state schools.

The expansion of schools also suffers from a lack of proper planning. There is a disproportionately large number of primary schools as compared to secondary and senior

[71] The increase in the number of schools has been quite massive after Sikkim's merger with India. The total number of schools was only 182 in 1961 which reached 1,474 schools in 1998-9 (Lama, 2001, p. 29).

secondary schools. This has resulted in problem of low enrolment in many of the primary schools (especially in areas with low population density)[72] and overcrowding of the senior schools in highly populated places, particularly in the east district of Sikkim (GoI, 2008), where the largest share of the state's population lives. With no coherent state level policy outlining the vision and the goals of education in the state, the HRDD, as a monitoring body, is often found short of meeting its functions. The centralization of most functions and overstaffing of the main HRDD office in the capital town of Gangtok has been seen as a major deterrent to the efficient functioning of the department (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 87). It has also been pointed out that the "son of the soil" recruitment policy has resulted in the appointment of "unsuitable and underqualified" (p. 82) locals as teachers in the government schools. There is overstaffing of teachers in urban schools, while many posts in remote areas have remained vacant posts for years (Planning Commission, 2008). According to CAG (2009), in 154 schools across Sikkim, majority (103) of which were in the urban areas of East District, had 572 teachers in excess while in 332 schools there was a shortage of 669 teachers (see Table 3.1.5). Similar concerns have been pointed out in an editorial of a local newspaper (Not Dumb Students, It's Uninspired Management to Blame, 2005) about the poor performance of government school students in the Board examinations, certain issues were highlighted. It pointed out the fact that, "the distribution of education is not uniform…there is too much disparity in quality and too little accountability" (para 2). It highlighted the inefficient management of the state HRDD, "too much political interference in the appointment of teachers and managing transfers", teachers unwilling to go to school in remote areas, lack of emphasis on building student proficiency in English (para 3). Further, the editorial concludes with the following:

> In fact, the whole focus of education should be on strengthening the junior school education so that students grow out from a good foundation. The focus is inverted at present with only senior levels getting attention. In most cases it is already too late by then. (2005, para 3)

Juneja (2011) while pointing out the great diversity of schools in India "in terms of infrastructure, quality, and outcomes" argues that opening up of access to school education does not mean that "all forms of school are equally available to all" (p. 242). Although there has been no systematic study looking at the socio-economic profile of the students accessing

[72] The opening up of private recognized and unrecognized schools in rural areas also contribute to the low enrolment in government primary schools (GoI, 2008).

various types of schools in Sikkim, like elsewhere, the children of the privileged often go to urban schools where there is a higher prevalence of better infrastructure and quality of education. Many of these institutions are either private or semi-government funded. Based on my field observations and interviews, the typical perception of stakeholders was that urban schools were "better" performing and offered "higher" quality of education compared to those located in the rural areas.

In the rural areas, there is a growing disillusionment with government school education. In 2012, 84 percent of the total number of rural students were in government schools and the remaining 16 per cent in private schools (NUEPA, 2012). In 2016, the percentage of students in rural government schools to the total number of rural students decreased to 75 per cent with 25 per cent in private schools (NUEPA, 2016). The 2014 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) data shows an even higher percentage of rural students in private schools. Almost 31.3 per cent of the students in rural areas were enrolled in private schools at the primary levels and 8.7 per cent at the higher levels (Pratham, 2015). The ASER report also highlights that the learning levels of students in rural government schools of Sikkim were declining at a rate much higher than the national average. Taking this information, Toney (2015), in his comparative study of a government and private school in a village in Sikkim, states that "Sikkim's rural government schools appear to suffering [sic] disproportionately more than the average Indian school of the same type, despite Sikkim's small size and relative economic prosperity" (p. 12). Thus, parents in the rural areas are increasingly looking at private schools[73] as an alternative for their children's education (Toney, 2015).

In the past two decades, there has been a rapid rise in the number of the low-cost private schools in the villages and the smaller towns. In 2012, 84 percent of the total number of all private schools in Sikkim were in the rural areas (NUEPA, 2012). However, 94 per cent (263 out of 279 schools) of the private schools in the rural areas provided education till the primary or upper primary levels (NUEPA, 2012). This means that majority of the students are still attending government schools, especially in the higher levels of schooling. Apart from the fact that most of the private schools in rural areas offer education only till primary or upper primary levels, Toney's (2015) study found that high fees levied by private schools in senior levels and public perception that private schooling at the foundational level was

[73] These schools are mostly what have been called "budget-priced" schools (Tooley, 2001) or "low-fee private" (LFP) schools (Srivastava, 2006) or "low-cost private schools" (Nambissan, 2012).

sufficient were major reasons for student enrolment in private school mostly at the lower levels of schooling. The main concern is, however, whether private schooling can fill the gap left by a failing state-sponsored education. Turning to these low-cost private schools (that themselves suffer from poor infrastructure, lesser qualified teaching staff, and other constraints) may not be the best choice but it certainly seems like the only alternative for those who can afford. For marginal workers and the rural poor, even this choice is often not there. Hence, a large majority of the students in Sikkim enrolled in government institutions and the low-cost private schools, especially in the rural areas, appear to be occupying the lower end of what Velaskar (2015) calls the "hierarchical stratification of the educational structure."

Access and Quality: Higher Education in Sikkim

Compared to school education, expansion of higher education in Sikkim has had a late start. At the time of the merger, only three colleges (a general degree college and two Buddhist institutions) had been established (Bhutia, 2005). That number increased to 5 in the 1980s with the addition of a law college and another institute for Buddhist higher studies. The 1990s and the early 2000s can be called a phase of rapid expansion with the establishment of various government and private unaided colleges. This phase also saw a rapid growth in the number of universities. By 2012-13, there were 6 universities (one central university, one institute of national importance and four private unaided universities), and 12 colleges (7 government and 5 private) in total (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2015).

The total enrolment in higher education in Sikkim in 1986-87 was only 596 which increased to 2,212 in 1999-2000 (MHRD, 2007). With a total enrolment of 6,596 students in the year 2004-05 the gross enrolment ratio [GER] was 9.61 with a low gender parity index of only 0.75 (MHRD, 2007). This drastically changed in the subsequent decade. In 2012-13, with 19,453 students enrolled in higher education, the GER increased to 24.3 much higher than the national average of 21.5. Also in the same year, with the GER of the males (21.8) lower than that of females (26.9), the gender parity index of Sikkim at 1.23 was much higher than the all-India average of 0.89 (MHRD, 2015). Going by these numbers, higher education in Sikkim may be said to have entered what Varghese (2015, p. 3) taking Trow's (2006) classification denotes as the "initial stages of massification."

Despite the rapid increase in the number of higher education institutions (HEIs) and total enrolment of students, there are some concerns regarding the status of higher education in Sikkim. As per the 2012-13 All India Survey on Higher Education [AISHE], the number of

colleges per lakh population at only 15 was much lower than the national average of 25 (MHRD, 2015), indicating limited access to higher education despite high enrolment. Most of the HEIs in Sikkim are concentrated in the east and the south districts of the state. The north district of Sikkim did not have a single college till 2017. Also, out of the total enrolled students in 2012-13 only 62 per cent were enrolled in the regular mode of education and maximum number of students (70 per cent) were concentrated in the undergraduate level courses (MHRD, 2015). This shows that the bulk of the enrolment is taking place at the college level. Even among the colleges, the general degree courses are the ones most opted by the students, and there is low enrolment in the technical courses (Bhutia, 2005). Another issue has been that of uneven enrolment in the various colleges. Government college enrolment (4,480 students) was more than 4 times higher than that in private colleges (1,047 students) in 2012-13 (MHRD, 2015) and government colleges located in urban areas taken in much larger share of student enrolment than rural ones (see Bhutia, 2005; HRDD, n.d.). This has resulted in the prominent colleges, especially the ones located in Gangtok, burdened with excessive enrolment (Bhutia, 2005) while the others suffer from low enrolment. This indicates that although the demand for higher education within the state is much higher among those who do not have the financial resources to study in private institutions, there is a low preference for rural HEIs. This has largely to do with accessibility, limited course options, and poorer infrastructure.

With a heavy enrolment in the government degree colleges, especially in the urban locations, there is higher responsibility on the state government to ensure equitable access and quality of education. That, however, seems to be lacking. The state-HRDD identified the key issues of higher education in Sikkim in the State Plan for RUSA [Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan], 2015-16 &2016-17, as follows: “inadequate financing”, “low employability and skills of graduates”, “lack of eligible teaching candidates in science and mathematics”, “limited motivation of students due to evaluation process in colleges”, “inadequate focus on research in higher education”, “lack of adequate infrastructure and equipment”, and finally, “the need to provide more equitable access to higher education for marginalized groups and communities” (HRDD, n.d., p 13). These point at multiple issues faced by the state government HEIs. At the time of the study, many of the degree colleges were operating on rented buildings with slow pace in the land acquisition process and construction work for separate campuses. The CAG, in their integrated audit of the state-HRDD, states that the gap between the sanctioned and achieved construction work on both school and college campuses across Sikkim “was indicative of lack of serious efforts on the

part of the Department to utilise the available funds for creation of much needed infrastructure" (CAG, 2009, p. 90). Out of a total of 275 faculty members in the 7 government degree colleges in Sikkim, only 105 were regular employees while 165 were working under ad hoc capacity in 2014-15 (HRDD, n.d.). Besides physical infrastructure and manpower shortage, many of the government HEIs also had shortage of educational resources such as well-equipped laboratories and libraries and other basic facilities (Bhutia, 2005). Without a well-formulated state policy on higher education and inefficient functioning of the state-HRDD, the government HEIs seems to be facing huge challenges in imparting quality education despite the overall growth in the higher educational sector within the state. This becomes a problem as the school pass-outs from remote and rural areas, especially those coming from lower socio-economic background, depend highly on these government degree colleges for their higher educational needs.

The main concern, regarding both school and higher education in Sikkim, is that of improving quality along with access. Despite rapid progress and growth of education in Sikkim there seems to be issues of uneven growth, proper utilization of funds, issues related to teacher recruitment and deployment, all of which hamper the provision of quality education. This results in the educational institutions being stratified along the lines of privilege which in turn depends on the type of management (government or private), location (rural or urban), and capacity of individual institutions to be able to get the attention and support of the higher authorities. In all this, the educational institutions catering to those from the lower sections of society face the brunt of it all. Within the larger context of scarcity of secure employment, and thereby credential inflation and intense competition for jobs, it becomes important to understand that just mere expansion of the educational system is not enough. To aid the ones at the margins, the educational system must ensure equity and quality as well. Thus, it is important to interrogate and understand what happens to young people who go to government schools and colleges in the rural areas of Sikkim. The remaining part of the chapter provides a brief introduction to the two main sites and a brief profile of the student participants included in the study.

The School and College in Rhenock: Sites of the Study

Among the first schools started by the Scottish Mission in Sikkim, starting from the late 1800s, one was in Rhenock. Despite the early head start, the growth of education in Rhenock took a back seat due to its rural location and the place losing importance after the Indo-Tibetan trade declined in the second half of the 20th century. At the time of the study in late

2000s, the Rhenock bazaar and its surrounding localities had 20 schools, out of which 12 were state government schools. The private schools, barring one missionary secondary school, were mostly schools offering primary education with minimal infrastructure and facilities. The schools in the area offered various levels of education. Majority (10 out of 20, 7 government and 3 private) were primary schools, 5 (2 government and 3 private) were till the junior high level, and 4 (2 government and 2 private) were secondary schools. There was only one senior secondary school, which was the one selected for the study. The only higher educational choice available to the students in Rhenock was the sole government degree college. This was the one chosen for the study.

The first visit to the school and the college was in 2009. The formal survey and interviews of the students were conducted between 2011 and 2012. The following sections briefly introduces the two institutions and then gives a brief profile of the student participants based on the data from the first survey.

The school. Government Senior Secondary School, Rhenock, locally called Government School Rhenock (henceforth, GSR or the School), was established as a primary school in the year 1879 by the Scottish Mission. This was among the first schools started by the Christian missionaries in various parts of Sikkim (GoS, 1923). From the 1940s onwards, the management of the school was transferred to a local *thikedari* family, and the institution was, thus, privately managed for a while. Sikkim became a protectorate state of India in 1950, and its inclusion in the Indian government's planned economic development[74] made it possible for state funding to be extended to the various village primary schools in Sikkim, which had till then been largely managed by private parties. It was during this time, in 1958, that GSR was taken over by the government under the *Maharaja* of Sikkim and upgraded to a junior high school. Following the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1975, the School came under the administrative control of the state government. In the late 1970s, it was upgraded to a secondary school. It finally became a senior secondary school in 1990.

GSR was initially located in the main bazaar of Rhenock and later shifted to a quieter locality, a kilometer away above the bazaar area, on a property donated by the *thikedars,* the prior patrons of the school. As you approached the school, the main gate opened into a relatively big field. On the left, a steep flight of concrete stairs, led up to the various school blocks. As you walked up, an old shack used as a kitchen for the preparation of the mid-day

[74] Sikkim had its the First Seven Year Plan (1954-61) formulated by the Planning Commission of India in the early 1950s.

meals was on the left. The stairs led to an open courtyard in front of the two main school blocks. This courtyard doubled up as the venue for morning assemblies and a playground during breaktime. It was also where the students and teachers gathered to meet various guests and visitors to the school.

The campus consisted of both old and new structures, painted in the customary yellow and green colors of government buildings in Sikkim. Each building was named after the level of schooling or, in the case of the senior school, after the various streams - the primary block, the middle school block, the commerce block, the science block, the vocational block, and so on. Meanwhile, the humanities block was housed in the main administrative building which also had the principal's office and a staff room.

The School had three toilets for the boys and two for the girls. There was a small library and an integrated science laboratory. The entire school overlooked the playground. The playground hosted local football tournaments, with the biggest one being the annual Independence Day tournament, which started in July and continued till the 15th of August. During such events, GSR attracted large number of visitors from the neighboring areas and other educational institutions.

The classrooms were equipped with the bare minimum – a blackboard; a ceiling fan; a table and a chair for the teacher; and rows of wooden desks and benches for the students. The walls displayed posters and charts made by the students. A desk meant for two to three students, often accommodated up to five in overcrowded classes. The bigger classrooms had raised wooden platforms in front of the blackboards for the teachers to stand on.

GSR, like all state government schools in Sikkim, followed the CBSE board and the curriculum set by the NCERT. The official medium of instruction was English. The total enrolment of students in the school, at the time of study, was estimated as 1,100. The least enrolment of students was in the primary school, and it increased as you went up the schooling level. Classes IX to XII normally had the highest enrolment of students, ranging from an average of 150 to 250 students per batch. In the senior school, the highest number of students was concentrated in the humanities and commerce streams, followed by science and then vocational. The student-teacher ratio of the school was 20 students per teacher, which was higher in the senior classes due to the high enrolment of students.

The total number of teachers in the school was around 40[75]. From the early 2000s, the state government, due to the increase in the number of qualified locals inside Sikkim, had drastically reduced the hiring of candidates from outside or the "non-locals" for most government posts. Hence, most of the newly recruited teachers at the school were from various parts of Sikkim. Also, among the senior teachers, majority of them were native to Rhenock and the surrounding areas, while the junior teachers were from across Sikkim.

The college. GCR was established in the year 2005 by the state government with the aim of extending access to higher education to students coming from rural areas. At the time of the study, the college in Rhenock, Government College Rhenock (henceforth GCR or the College), was relatively a newly established college and was emerging as a viable higher educational destination for the students in the senior secondary schools in Rhenock and neighboring areas. GCR was initially affiliated to North Bengal University [NBU] in West Bengal. With the establishment of a central university in Sikkim (Sikkim University [SU]) in 2007, the college became affiliated to SU from the 2008-09 academic session.

From 2005 to 2009, the College only offered a B.A. (Pass) or B.A. (General) Degree.[76] Under SU, it became mandatory for the colleges to adopt the semester system instead of the annual system that was prevalent before. The main subjects offered were Economics, Education, English, Geography, History, Nepali, Political Science, and Sociology. Additional papers on Environmental Science and Eastern Himalayan Studies were also taught. Students could opt for various combinations of arts and social science subjects. The B.A. (General) course continued till the 2009-10 academic session. From 2010-11 onwards, SU granted permission to the college to offer B.A. Honors courses in two subjects, Geography and Sociology.[77] The medium of instruction in the college was English.

The College, at the time of the study, had minimal infrastructure. It was housed in three rented buildings, built close together facing the vehicular road. The buildings were situated right next to the road, in a quiet locality above the Rhenock bazaar. The smallest of

[75] There were some fluctuations in the total number of teachers during the period of my fieldwork due to teacher transfers and hiring of contractual teachers.

[76] Nakassis (2016) in his study in Tamil Nadu highlights the hierarchy of colleges based on the type of funding and student background. According to him, "students from privileged class, caste, and regional backgrounds were more likely to be found in (self-financing) courses like commerce, computer science, and the like, while first-generation students, rural students, and lower-class and lower-caste students were more likely to be found in (aided) arts and sciences courses that were considered to lack "market value."" (p. 13) This was the case in Sikkim too. Majority of the colleges accessible to the rural students from lower socio-economic background were often being government degree colleges offering very limited course options having lower "market value."

[77] Later, from the 2012-13 academic session, SU made B.A. (Honours) mandatory in all the affiliated colleges and removed the B.A. (General) Degree from the undergraduate curriculum.

these buildings had three levels. The upper two levels consisted of one classroom per floor and the lowest floor had the toilets for the students. The building in the middle was the tallest with five floors in all. The lower two floors of this building were below the road level, closed on one side, and housed two classrooms, which were larger compared to the others. The floor at the road level floor of the building was divided into five small rooms and a toilet for the staff. The inner three rooms were the offices of the principal, the administrative officer, and the non-teaching staff. The two outer rooms in the same floor housed the examination cell and IGNOU branch office. These rooms were open, facing the road. At night, the caretaker would lock them by pulling down the heavy metal shutters, like the ones seen in shops. The geography classroom and the geography laboratory were on the floor above the road level floor, and the library was at the topmost level. The third building had three floors. The road level floor was the common staffroom which again opened onto the road. Above this floor was the office for the vice-principal and dean of students' welfare, while the floor below it had one small classroom.

The state government had acquired 32.67 acres of land, downhill from the rented one, for the college campus[78], where construction work had already begun. The teachers and students, in their interviews, often complained about the slow pace of the construction, and the minimal infrastructure in the makeshift campus.

Initially, the College had two faculty members per subject (and one for Environmental Studies), making a total of 17. Out of the 17, only seven were permanent or regular employees, while the rest were hired on contractual basis. The latter were referred to as *ad hoc* lecturers. The task of teaching the additional paper of Eastern Himalayan Studies, introduced by SU, was divided between the various teachers of the main subjects. In 2011, with the college administration pressing for honors in all the subjects, 18 additional faculty members were recruited. All the new teachers were, however, hired on *ad hoc* or temporary contract basis. During the period of the study, more than 80 per cent of the teachers in the college were, hence, *ad hoc* employees.

The principal was the administrative head. The vice-principal and the dean of student affairs were appointed based on seniority among the permanent faculty members. Other senior faculty members were given charge of various committees overlooking the admission process, examinations, library, discipline, and other miscellaneous activities.

[78] In February 2013, the college shifted to the new, semi-completed campus.

The participants. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the initial fieldwork in 2011-12, consisted of two-stages of sampling. In the first stage, school and college students in the final year, class XII in case of school and third year in case of college students, were given a questionnaire. In the second, a smaller sample was chosen from both the school and the college for the in-depth interviews. The profile of the school and college students that follows is drawn from the 2011-12 survey data.

The school students. The students were primarily from Rhenock and its surrounding villages, both in Sikkim and West Bengal. The senior secondary level at GSR, being the only choice for higher schooling in the area, brought together students coming from different locations, schooling histories and, to an extent, various socio-economic backgrounds. The questionnaire (survey) was given to the class XII students in 2011. Out of a batch of 155 students (86 girls and 69 boys), 119 students (49 boys and 70 girls) participated in the survey, and 24 students (12 boys and 12 girls) were chosen for the in-depth interviews. In addition to the students, their parents and the senior schoolteachers were also interviewed.

Although majority of the students were from Rhenock and its surrounding areas, we can see from the data that students from the neighboring villages of West Bengal were also attending the school in Rhenock. From the 119 student participants, 64 were from Rhenock, 27 from the places near Rhenock, and 19 were from the neighboring areas of West Bengal and 9 from outside Sikkim and West Bengal (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1

School Students by Place of Origin

Place	Male	Female	No. of Students
Rhenock	25	39	64
Sikkim (Outside Rhenock)[a]	11	16	27
West Bengal	10	09	19
Outside Sikkim or West Bengal[b]	03	06	09
Total	49	70	119

Note. The above table illustrates that GSR being in a border town got students from across the border as well as the local area.

[a] Refers to students who were from the surrounding areas of Rhenock within Sikkim.

[b] Refers to those from the Bihari and Marwari business communities who were residing in Rhenock but gave their permanent address elsewhere.

The college students. Like in GSR, the students in GCR were mostly from Rhenock and the surrounding areas. Students from other parts of Sikkim also took admission in the college. Occasionally, few students from other north-eastern states of India and from Bhutan were also admitted.

Table 3.2

Year wise Number of Students Admitted in GCR (2009-13)

Year	Male		Female		No. of Students	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
2009-10	26	42	36	58	62	100
2010-11	30	36	54	64	84	100
2011-12	38	51	36	49	74	100
2012-13	46	44	58	56	104	100

Note. The above data was sourced from the GCR Admission Records.

The intake capacity of the College was around 350 to 400 students but student enrolment in GCR was generally low during the time of the study (Table 3.2). As per the college admission records, in 2009, only 62 students took admission. It increased to 84 students in 2010. In 2011, the number dipped again to 74 students (38 males and 36 females). In 2012-13, the college saw an increase in students admitted at 104. The female enrolment in the college was generally higher than the male enrolment.

The survey questionnaire for the study was given to students in the final or third year of college in 2011-12. Out of the total of 32 students, 30 (7 males and 23 females) returned the questionnaire and 14 students (4 males and 10 females) were selected for the further in-depth interviews[79]. 18 of the student participants were from Rhenock and the nearby areas. Nine students were from other places in Sikkim and only three were from the bordering villages of West Bengal.

Schooling background. In addition to the students who had studied in GSR from the primary level, the senior classes had students coming in from many nearby feeder schools.

[79] Due to the smaller size of the college sample, I also draw upon other sources of data, such as focus group interviews with other students, participant observation, conversations and encounters with the larger college community - students, teachers, administrators, and the other non-teaching staff members – for the study.

These feeder schools were both government and private. These students came from the local schooling cluster made up of junior high and secondary schools located in Rhenock and its neighboring areas. GSR was the only senior secondary school in the area. Of the school participants, 56 per cent had an all-government schooling while 36 per cent had private schooling in the elementary level only. 16 per cent had studied in private schools till the secondary level. Most of the private schools attended by the students were low-cost, primary schools in the localities they lived in. Majority of the students who had studied in a private institution till the secondary level, had done so in a local missionary school, close to GSR. The residents with relatively higher incomes, such as teachers, government employees, small business owners, sent their children to the above missionary school, if not outside the state.

Table 3.3

Schooling Background

Schooling Background	School Students		College Students	
	No.	%	No.	%
All Govt[a]	66	56	23	77
Pvt-Govt-Govt[b]	36	30	6	20
Pvt-Pvt-Govt[c]	16	13	1	3
Govt-Pvt-Govt[d]	1	1	0	0
	119	100	30	100

Note.

[a] Refers to government schools at all levels of schooling.

[b] Refers to private schools only till the primary and/or upper primary levels and government schools after that.

[c] Private schools till the secondary level.

[d] Private school at secondary level and government school at the primary and senior secondary levels.

Among the college participants, with more than half of the students being from Rhenock and the neighboring areas, 16 of them had studied in GSR, prior to joining the college. The others were from senior secondary schools near Rhenock and other places in Sikkim (14). The three students from West Bengal had passed out from GSR (2) and one of the nearby senior secondary schools at Chujachen in Sikkim (1). Looking at the schooling

background of the college students, majority of them (77 per cent) had an all-government schooling and only 6 (20 per cent) had studied in a private school at the primary level before joining government schools (Table 3.3). Only 1 student from (Rhenock) had studied till the secondary level in the local missionary school. Comparing the schooling background of the school participants with those from the college, there was a higher proportion of students with only government schooling in the college sample while a higher percentage of students from the school has studied in private schools. This points at the fact that the proportion of students from higher income families was higher in the school sample compared to college. To an extent, it can also be attributed to the increasing enrolment in private schools in the area.

Social class and father's occupation. Vasavi (2019) points out three distinct classes in formation in rural India. According to her, there is, "a small class of rural elite, a growing and highly differentiated body of new rural middle classes and a marginalised majority representing mostly the low-ranked caste and tribal groups who are small and marginal agriculturalists or landless labour" (2019: p. 43). As both the institutions chosen for the study were rurally located and government managed, the children of what Vasavi (2019) terms the "rural elite" and the upper sections of "rural middle classes" were largely missing from the sample. Thus, the *Eleven-Class Schema* developed by Vaid and Heath (2010), Vaid (2012; 2018) was chosen as it gives a detailed breakdown of broader occupational categories at the lower middle and lower occupational levels. This was needed to capture the smaller *class fractions* that resulted from variations in economic, social, and cultural capital possessed by the student participants owing to their parents' differential occupational status.

Students (both in the school and the college) were asked to give the occupational details of both their parents[80] and, where relevant, of their guardian. Then the occupations were categorized into nine occupational groups borrowing from the *Eleven-Class Schema*. Not all the class groups and occupations present in this *Schema* were represented in the sample and thus, has been slightly modified to suit the context of the study. For instance, in terms of occupational groups, the high professionals, the big and the medium businesses represented in the *Schema* were not reflected in the sample. Even the medium and big farmers possessing landholdings of more than five acres were not present in the sample. The students who

[80] Although occupational details of both parents were asked for in the survey, for the categorisation, the father's occupation has been primarily used, except in cases where the mother was the only or the main earning member.

attended the GSR and GCR mostly came from rural lower-middle classes and lower classes, which shall be explained further.

The nine occupational groups taken are as follows:

1. Low Professional – Lower professionals, Class II employees in government and private sector, schoolteachers.
2. Clerical – Salaried lower-level administrative employees: Class III (clerical), and Class IV (peons, drivers, and other office maintenance staff) in government and private sector.
3. Small business and entrepreneurs – Small businesspersons, main *bazaar* shopkeepers, contractors, political workers, and self-employed persons.
4. Petty business – Petty shopkeepers, roadside stalls, vegetable sellers in weekly local markets, etc.
5. Skilled and semi-skilled manual – Electricians, plumbers, taxi-drivers, carpenters, etc.
6. Unskilled manual - Construction workers and laborers.
7. Small farmers - Owner-cultivators of small land holdings measuring less than 5 acres.
8. Low agriculturalists - Tenant farmers and agricultural workers.
9. Unemployed – Those not in labor force.

Further, the above occupational groupings have been conflated to form three main social classes, based on the varying degrees of security (or marginality) of employment conditions. Bourdieu (1984 [1979]) argued that within each social class, there are "class fractions" owing to the type or "composition of capital" (mainly, economic, and cultural) and the "volume of capital" (See also Parry, 2005). Likewise, the social class categories, employed for the study, does bring together various occupational groups, possessing varying degrees of *economic*, *cultural*, and *social capital*, into a single class category. For most part of the study, I refer primarily to the broad social class of the student participants, identifying specific occupational categories of their parents and other markers of privilege or disadvantage where relevant. The three categories of social class, thus, employed in the study are as follows:

I. Lower Middle Class [LMC], which includes the occupational categories of the low professionals; the clerical; and the small business and entrepreneurs.
II. Lower Class (Upper) [LCU], which includes those in petty business; skilled and semiskilled manual occupations; and the small farmers.
III. Lower Class (Lower) [LCL], which includes the unskilled manual workers, the low agriculturalists and the unemployed (not in the labor force).

The lower middle-class students are those who belong to families where the parents are engaged in occupations that are salaried or have higher levels of income security compared to those from the lower class. Next the broad lower-class category has been divided into two levels: the lower class (upper) and the lower class (lower). The lower class (upper) occupations are those with less stable incomes than the lower middle class but higher than the lower class (lower). The lower class (lower) are those engaged in marginal work and are the least secure in terms of employment and income generation.

Table 3.4

Social Class & Father's/Guardian's Occupational Category

Social class	School students		College students	
	No.	%	No.	%
Lower middle class (LMC)	**58**	**49**	**9**	**30**
Low professional	10	8	3	10
Clerical	28	24	4	13
Small Business and Entrepreneurs	20	17	2	7
Lower class upper (LCU)	**45**	**38**	**18**	**60**
Petty business	12	10	1	3
Skilled and semi-skilled manual	14	12	1	3
Small farmers	19	16	16	53
Lower class lower (LCL)	**16**	**13**	**3**	**10**
Unskilled manual	1	1	-	-
Low agriculturalists	11	9	3	10
Not employed	4	3	-	-
Total	119	100	30	100

Table 3.4 shows the how the students' fathers (or guardians) are distributed based on social class. The table shows that almost half of the school students came from the lower middle class, especially from the clerical occupational group. Among the college students, majority (70 per cent) were from the lower-class category, most of whom were the children of small farmers. This confirms what was discussed before in the section on schooling background about there being a higher representation of stable income families among the school sample as compared to the college sample. Among the marginal workers, most of the

students from both school and college came from families where parents worked as agricultural laborers.

Parent's educational level. Tables 3.5 and 3.6 show that majority of the students come from families with histories of low engagement with formal education. In both the school and college sample, father's educational level was overall higher than that of mothers. Also, educational level of parents of school students were higher than that of college students. In the school sample, the highest number of fathers were those who had studied only till upper primary level while in the college sample, the highest number of fathers were those who had either not attended school or only studied till primary level. Highest number of mothers of both school and college participants (29 per cent and 37 per cent) were in the category of those who had not attended school. In both the sample, majority of fathers (76 per cent in school and 84 per cent in college) and mothers (88 per cent in school and 87 per cent in college) were concentrated in the levels below secondary schooling.

The higher educational participation of parents was very low. Only 3 fathers and 2 mothers in school and a father in college sample had undergraduate degree. 2 fathers of school participants, however, had post-graduate degree. Majority of the students in both school and college were, thus, the first generation to access higher education.

Table 3.5

School Students by Father's Educational Level

Father's Educational Level	School Students		College Students	
	No.	%	No.	%
Not attended school	21	18	**8**	**27**
Primary level	18	15	**8**	**27**
Upper primary level	**27**	**23**	6	20
Secondary level	24	20	3	10
Senior secondary level	19	16	3	10
Under-graduate	3	3	1	3
Post-graduate	2	2	0	0
No response	5	4	1	3
Total	119	101	30	100

Table 3.6

School Students by Mother's Educational Level

Mother's Educational Level	School Students		College Students	
	No.	%	No.	%
Not attended school	**34**	**29**	**11**	**37**
Primary level	30	25	6	20
Upper primary level	26	22	6	20
Secondary level	14	12	3	10
Senior secondary level	8	7	1	3
Under-graduate	2	2	0	0
Post-graduate	0	0	0	0
No response	5	4	3	10
Total	119	101	30	100

Social category. In Table 3.7, the social categories of general and other backward classes have been further broken down into two sub-categories each. The students who were from Sikkim adhered to the State level categorisation while filling the questionnaire. This posed a problem in the representation of the general[81] and the other backward classes category[82]. To accommodate the categories employed by the students, I have divided the general and other backward classes into two categories to show the break-up of the students' identification with either the State List or the Central List.

[81] The general category here consists of two groups of students. One group comprises students from Sikkim and West Bengal belonging to the General Category in the Central List. The students from Sikkim (mostly from the business Marwari and Bihari communities) are those who are put under the "Others" category in the State List. The other group consists of those students from Sikkim (from the Newar, Bahun and Chettri communities) who fall under Other Backward Classes in the State List or General category under the Central List.

[82] The Other Backward Classes also have been further divided into two groups, the ones from West Bengal and the ones from Sikkim. Most of the Central List OBCs from Sikkim are also known as the Most Backward Classes in the State List. They comprise of students from the following communities: Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar and Thami. These communities, except for the Dewans, are recognized as the Other Backward Classes in the central list [see Rai (2013, p. 122-126) for details on the state level and central categorization of various communities of Sikkim].

Table 3.7

Social Category

Social Category	School Students		College Students	
	Number	%	Number	%
General (Central list)	73	61	14	47
"Other Backward Classes" (from Sikkim)	53	45	12	40
General (outside Sikkim) & "Others" (from Sikkim)	20	17	2	7
Other backward classes (Central list)	22	18	5	17
"Most Backward Classes" (from Sikkim)	21	18	5	17
Other Backward Classes (outside Sikkim)	1	1	0	0
Scheduled tribe	22	18	8	27
Scheduled caste	2	2	3	10
Total	119	99	119	101

Rhenock has a large number of upper caste Nepalis, namely the Bahuns, the Chettris and the Newars, living there. They are recognized as "other backward classes" within Sikkim. This was reflected in the sample as seen in Table 3.7. They formed 45 per cent and 40 per cent of the total percentage in both school and college sample respectively. The Marwari and Bihari students comprised the bulk of the students listed in the table as *General (outside Sikkim) & "Others" (from Sikkim)*. The students were moderately distributed in rest of the categories, except for the scheduled castes (SCs). The percentage of scheduled castes to the total population of Rhenock is 10.15 per cent while that of scheduled tribes (STs) is 14.18 per cent (Census, 2011b). The ST category was well represented but there was a lower representation of SC students especially in the school sample. Although the SCs are in minority when compared to other social categories, Rhenock had the highest proportion of scheduled caste population to the total population among all other towns in Sikkim (Directorate of Census Operations, 2011).

Conclusions

Like in many other places of India, in Sikkim too, education is quite indicative of the inequalities and contradictions of the society at large. The changes brought about by

modernisation has resulted in an increasingly unequal society, whereby the competition for resources and privileges have become highly tough. In Sikkim, the trend points toward a stratified system of education that often privileges the urban over the rural, private over government institutions, access over quality, and representations over actual learning outcomes. The way education in Sikkim has developed illustrates that the margins have been often overlooked.

Within this context, I have introduced the school and college as the two main sites of the study. From the preliminary data presented in this chapter, we can see that the students studying in two rural institutions (a senior secondary school and college) were overwhelmingly from the rural lower middle and lower social classes. These institutions being rurally located, and government run, did not usually cater to the children belonging to the upper sections of the society. The students who go to GSR and GCR also came from families with low educational participation and minimal experience of higher education. The chapters that follow, thus, attempts to understand how these young people navigate their educational and occupational futures after school through their aspirations and choices.

CHAPTER FOUR

Aspirations and Choices of School Students

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, there has been a proliferation of schools, both government and private, in various parts of Sikkim in the past four decades. In the past two decades, high participation in education has coincided with the scarcity of white-collar jobs, especially in the much-desired public sector and hence the route to upward mobility through education has become rather doubtful. It, thus, becomes important to see how this larger context influence and interact with aspirations and choices of the young people at the margins. This chapter and the one following it, thus, will explore the experiences of students in a rural senior secondary school and college, respectively. As shown in Chapter 3, students in school (and college too) were largely from families where parents had low levels of educational attainment. A sizable proportion of the student sample were first generation to go to school and majority of them were the first generation to access higher education. Thus, for majority of the students and their families this transition from school to higher education was a novel experience with its share of both expectations and uncertainties.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of the student choices in relation to streams and subject choices. It then looks at their aspirations for the future. After the overview of the student choices and aspirations, the chapter looks at the possible influences on how the students construct their future possibilities and goals. Among the influences, we shall first discuss the role of school and then that of family and gender. Finally, we place the students' aspirations and choices within the context of the higher educational option available to them.

Table 4.1

Descriptor Codes for Participants

Variable	Category	Abbreviated Code
Gender	Male	M
	Female	F
Stream	Humanities	Hum
	Science	Sci
	Commerce	Com
	Vocational Studies	Voc
Social Class	Lower Middle Class	LMC
	Lower Class (Lower)	LCL
	Lower Class (Upper)	LCU

The data presented in this chapter is primarily from the initial survey (2011) and in-depth interviews (2011-12) with students, parents, and teachers. We also draw upon the field observations and informal interaction with those in school and others in the local area. The abbreviated codes employed to describe participants, henceforth, are shown in Table 4.1. Occupational category of the parents and details of teacher interviewees have also been specified where needed. As mentioned earlier in Chapter One, to ensure confidentiality, all participants have been given pseudonyms. At times, minor identity details have been modified, provided such modifications do not affect the accuracy of data presentation. Even the teachers have been described based on streams instead of specific subjects taught by them. Subjects, like English, Nepali, mathematics, that were taught across streams have been marked as Gen (for general).

Subject Choices and Aspirations

Stream choices. The senior secondary students were divided into different streams of humanities, science, commerce, and vocational studies. Due to the lack of adequate infrastructure (such as laboratory facilities and classroom space) in the School and the requirement for a higher level of aptitude and proficiency in science and mathematics, the School limited the intake of students in science and commerce streams. Thus, there was a 'merit-based' selection of students for these streams. Students were selected based on their past performance in the class X board examinations. Those with the highest marks were allotted a seat in the science stream, followed by commerce. The humanities and vocational studies were relatively easier to get in, often admitting all those who did not meet the requirements set by the School. Evidently, science was the most sought-after stream by the students. All the science students and many from the other streams said that science was their "first" choice. Commerce ranked second in terms of student preference, followed by humanities and then vocational studies. Table 4.2 shows the streamwise and gender wise break-up of all the students enrolled in standard XII in 2011. Table 4.3 shows the streams of only the student participants.

In table 4.2, out of the total number of standard XII students (155) in the class XII batch in 2011, the largest share (45 per cent) of the students was in humanities. The total number of students enrolled in science and commerce each were almost half of that in humanities. Vocational studies accounted for only 10 per cent of the total students. Almost half of the female students were in humanities. Comparing the male and the female enrolment, in science, there was a slightly higher proportion of boys (to their total number)

than that of girls despite the absolute number of gender wise enrolment (18 each) being equal. However, in commerce it was the reverse with female enrolment being much higher and a higher proportion of female students to their total number being represented.

Table 4.2

All Standard XII Students by Stream

Stream	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Humanities	**29**	**42**	**41**	**48**	**70**	**45**
Science	18	26	18	21	36	23
Commerce	13	19	21	25	34	22
Vocational Studies	09	13	06	07	15	10
Total	69	100	86	101	155	100

Table 4.3

Student Participants by Stream

Stream	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Humanities	**16**	**33**	**34**	**49**	**50**	**42**
Science	15	31	14	20	29	24
Commerce	12	24	19	27	31	26
Vocational Studies	06	12	03	4	09	8
Total	49	100	70	100	119	100

Looking at Table 4.3, the student sample who participated in the study shows similar pattern of gender wise and overall distribution as that of the larger batch. It can also be seen that 91 per cent of commerce students, 81 per cent of science, 71 per cent of humanities and 60 per cent of vocational studies participated in the study.

Higher educational aspirations. The students, both male and female, in the survey expressed high aspirations for further education (Table 4.4). These high aspirations can largely be referred to as what Kintrea et al. (2011) and St. Clair et al. (2013) term “idealistic” aspirations, that is aspirations held by individuals “if there were no real world constraints” (2011, p. 13).

Table 4.4

School Students' Educational Aspirations

Highest Level of Education Aspired	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Senior Secondary School	-	-	-	-	-	-
Undergraduate (UG)	3	10	3	7	6	8
Postgraduate (PG)	10	32	**21**	**49**	31	42
Beyond PG	**18**	**58**	19	44	**37**	**50**
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	31	100	43	100	74	100

All students wanted to continue their education post school. Only a small number (6 out of 119) wanted to study till their undergraduate level, while the rest stated that they wanted to study even further. Most of the students were concentrated in the category of those who wanted to pursue their post-graduate or beyond post-graduate studies. Half of the total number of students (37 out of 74) wanted to pursue their higher studies even after their post-graduation. While the maximum number of female students (21 out of 43) wanted to study till their post-graduation, majority of the male students (18 out of 31) stated that they wanted to study even further.

With regards to their higher educational destinations, the students gave varied responses. While more than half of the students (68 out of 119) aspired to go outside Sikkim for higher studies, one-third of them (45 out of 119) wanted to study within Sikkim. The rest were open to both options. The popular destination choices for higher education outside the state were nearby Siliguri and the bigger metropolitan cities like Kolkata, Bangalore, and Delhi. Within the state, the government degree college in Gangtok was the most preferred.

Occupational aspirations. The students' high aspirations for further education were mirrored in their occupational aspirations too. Here, Zipin et al.'s (2013) "doxic" aspirations as encouraged by powerful societal discourse (which assigns high desirability to certain occupations or pathways) can be relevant in the case of students at GSR with respect to their occupational (and educational) aspirations. An overwhelming majority of the students (96 out of 119) aspired towards professional white-collar jobs which included that of engineers,

teachers, doctors, nurses, administrative officers, chartered accountants, lawyers, and bank managers. A small number (9 out of 119) wanted to become businesspersons and entrepreneurs. Joining the armed forces was another consideration for few students (6 out of 119). 5 students mentioned more miscellaneous aspirations as sportspersons, actors, models, and air hostesses, while 3 gave no specific response.

The social prestige attached to certain occupations was a major motivation for students to opt for various subjects in the senior secondary level. The opposite was true as well. In many cases, the streams taken by the students were not their first choice and, hence, the one they had finally enrolled in informed their occupational aspirations. Most of the science students wanted to become doctors and engineers. The commerce students wanted to start 'big' businesses or work for a bank or become chartered accountants. Among the humanities students, the popular career options were to become bureaucrats, army officers, lawyers, and teachers. The vocational students wanted to start their own agriculture-based businesses or become horticulture inspectors and researchers.

Influences on Choices and Aspirations

The choices and aspirations of the students, taken together, need to be located within the contexts of the students' lives. The School and the family played a crucial role in shaping the young people's aspirations. The decisions made by students and their families regarding their futures were also affected by the opportunities accessible to them within their economic and socio-cultural situations. Although in the 2011-12 survey the participants had responded with high aspirations for both higher education and occupational goals, the in-depth interviews (2011-12) revealed that the students had a more nuanced view of their future. In a way, the students' post school plans were highly dependent on the various resources or stocks of *capital* that their families could access. While for a few students, there were some possibilities that gradually opened, for many, there was a deflation of their aspirations as academic, financial, and socio-cultural "realities" begin to surface. This points at what Kintrea et.al (2011, p. 14) call "realistic" aspiration, which "reflect perceived individual and structural constraints". Zipin et.al's (2013) "habituated" aspirations that "embody the possibilities-*within-limits* of given social-structural positions" (p. 234) is also of relevance in understanding the participants' in-depth responses.

The main intention is to understand how the young people's ideas about their future selves were borne out of a configuration of possibilities and limitations posed by the School, family backgrounds, parental expectations, cultural values and various social and self-

fashioned identities. The main axis around which these aspirational horizons revolved was education. We shall first discuss the role of the School, beginning with the description of various aspects of the school environment that shaped the educational experiences and subsequent choice making process of the students. Next, we will highlight the role of the family especially regarding the various resources, parental expectations and worries. Finally, we describe how the available higher educational options and state policies interact with social class, gender, family expectations, and socio-cultural identities to convert what Hart (2014: 137) terms *preferences* into *choices*.

The School. The school was an important influence on the choices and aspirations of students. We first try to understand the school environment with its issues and challenges and various practices adopted by GSR to deal with those issues. This understanding is important to better understand the context of schooling within which the students formulated their plans for their futures and made choices accordingly.

The school environment. At the time of the study, GSR was plagued by various problems, with overcrowding of students in the classroom being a major one. This was usually the case at the secondary and senior secondary level. During visits to the School, I often saw the senior school students noisily shoving one another as they made their way into the narrow corridors to shift rooms for their next lesson. During breaks, the students would spill into the school courtyard from various classrooms, resulting in chaos. The teachers would, often unsuccessfully, reprimand the students to maintain silence.

As mentioned, GSR was the only option for senior secondary education in Rhenock. Students from various feeder schools in and around Rhenock took admission at the School. In the senior classes (XI and XII), at times, a single batch could consist of up to 200 and higher number of students. Most of the classrooms were equipped to accommodate 30 to 40 students each. Due to the School's policy of merit-based selection of students in the various streams, the problem of overcrowding was more severe in the case of humanities. In shared classes like language (English or Nepali), students from various streams came together, the desks and stools meant to accommodate two to three persons would have five or more students trying to squeeze in. Many would stand at the back of the room.

The overcrowding inside classrooms were pointed out by both the teachers and students as a serious issue. For students, it meant that most of the lessons were not audible to majority of the students. Raju (M, Hum, LMC) remarked, "If you do not enter the class early enough, most of the front row seats are taken. The teacher's voice reaches only till the first four rows." He reluctantly added, "At the back, we mostly just talk and joke around." For the

teachers too, having a large number of students in each class was often an overwhelming experience. Ms. Roshni (F, Gen, teacher) exasperatedly pointed out, “The infrastructure has to be there. I have to teach a class of more than a hundred students in one go. We don’t have rooms to accommodate such a large number.”

In addition to overcrowding, GSR was also facing several limitations related to the physical infrastructure and other facilities. The School was in dire need of restoration and maintenance. The female students pointed out that the toilets were not clean and lacked running water most of the time. The School did have a library, a computer room, and science laboratories. According to the teachers and the students, these facilities were far from satisfactory. The library was filled with old books and magazines. There were no reference books, journals, or reading material that was relevant to the current syllabus or what the students needed. The students said the “same old magazines and books” were always lying around. The computers were very old and rarely visited. The science laboratories were another story. There were no lab attendants. The teachers and the students had to maintain the labs on their own. To add to that, due to lack of funding, new equipment and instruments were rarely purchased, and the students and teachers had to make do with what was sanctioned years ago. The teachers also complained about the lack of teaching aids.

These problems adversely affected the academic life in GSR. The teachers admitted that it was difficult to create a good learning environment and keep students motivated. Students bunking classes halfway through the day was quite common. It was hard for the administrators and teachers to monitor students as GSR did not have a boundary wall around it. The campus flowed into the surrounding residential area. The lack of provision for lunch at the School made it easy for the senior students to slip out to eat and not return for the rest of the day.

Quite interestingly, majority of student participants emphasized the need for sports and extra-curricular activities rather than that of academic facilities. A big concern among them was the lack of a school auditorium to host various cultural programs. The playground was the venue for different events conducted by GSR. These events included cultural programs, football tournaments, quiz competitions, debates, among others. These were an important part of the school life. The bigger events, especially the Independence Day celebrations, were open to outsiders to attend.

The school authorities too mirrored the students in the importance they attached to these cultural and extra-curricular events. It was often perceived by the authorities that the status of GSR depended on how well such events were organized. Local and state level

politicians were invited as special guests, panchayat members and NGOs got actively involved, classes were suspended, and months of practice and rehearsals were held. School management committees, teachers, and students invested a lot of time and energy into these activities.

Another aspect of school life emphasized by the authorities was that of student discipline and decorum. Local perceptions of a "good" school also often underscored the need for the school administration to maintain a strict disciplinary regime within the institution. Benei (2005) in her study of a military school in Maharashtra shows how "discipline", "routine" and "order" were inscribed onto the students' bodies through a "strict regimentation process" (p. 143). At GSR, despite the frequent chaos caused by sheer overcrowding of the students, attempts at disciplining the students were quite strongly emphasized. During visits to the School, the principal could be seen walking around with a cane in his hand, ushering students to enter their classrooms quietly and to maintain silence. Although, the gesture was conducted in a semi-humorous manner, it could be considered a reminder to the students about the school authorities take on indiscipline. GSR also had strict rules about students' outward appearance and the dress code. Educational institutions in India, even colleges (see Hebbar and Kaur, 2021), have been seen to give heightened attention to the prescribed dress code of students. At GSR, routine checking of the students during the morning assembly was conducted. Dyeing of hair and modifying of the school uniform were strictly not allowed. Boys wearing their hair long were called out and reportedly given a "haircut" in front of the entire assembly. The issue of substance abuse was another matter of concern. Rhenock, a border town, faced the problem of drug peddling and high incidence of substance abuse, especially among the young. According to some of the students, body searches of students suspected of carrying drugs or other substance were sometimes carried out in school.

When it came to punishments, the students were usually reprimanded or issued a warning. Though I did not witness it myself, students spoke about physical punishment being meted out as well. Such punishments came in the form of being made to do sit-ups, kneeling in front the school assembly, and in serious cases, even being caned. This was more so in the case of boys rather than girls. Verbal abuse by some teachers was also mentioned by a few students. Gopal (M, Com, LMC) stated that few teachers talked to students in a "manner-less way" and that they used "bad words." Priya (F, Hum, LMC) also talked about teachers being strict, "They are strict and some of them often yell at us."

With the enrolment of excess number of students and limited infrastructural facilities, the senior school was a challenging terrain for the teachers and the administrators who expressed being overwhelmed with the situation. Under the status quo, a semblance of order had to be carved out. This was seen in the emphasis the School gave to the ritual of routine checking during the morning assembly and constant monitoring of student behaviour and discipline. On the other hand, some students felt that the above disciplinary practices gave undue attention to their dress code and outward appearances while academic matters were not taken seriously. Sudeep (M, Sci, LMC), like few others, felt that the School was less strict about studies or students "bunking classes" and more concerned about "stupid things" like "hairstyle and dress up."

To sum up the nature of the school environment, there was a heightened interest in extra-curricular activities and on student discipline. Academic and curricular matters, on the other hand, were perceived to be relegated to the background. For the school community, the extra-curricular events can be seen as providing an escape from the difficult task of ensuring a conducive learning environment, given the limitations. The prevailing low focus on academic life in GSR was a complex issue. Poor infrastructure and overcrowding of the classrooms were, of course, significant factors influencing the learning environment in the School. As we shall see next, the level of academic abilities, actual or perceived, of students in the senior classes was another.

Multiple hierarchies: Perceptions of students and teachers. In GSR, the students, based on their academic ability, were often differentiated into "high" and "low" performers. The broad perception held by the teachers at GSR about their students was that most of them ("more than eighty per cent", according to the estimate of a senior schoolteacher) were not academically competent to handle the workload of senior level schooling. The teachers pointed out that the biggest impediment was the low proficiency of the students in language and other foundational level skills and knowledge. According to them, there was also an overall low engagement with academic work. This was more so in the case of students with a government school background than the ones who had attended private schools before joining GSR in the senior level. As earlier mentioned, senior school students at GSR came from different schools and social classes.

In addition to the distinctions between the privately schooled and the government schooled students, the School also graded the students based on the streams they were enrolled in. These hierarchies, to a great extent, overlapped with each other and, implicitly, pointed at the class differences between the students. As we shall see, the students coming

from stable-income families with parents in low professional occupations and higher levels of education were at an advantage compared to the students from families where parents were marginal workers and had minimal or no formal education.

Schooling history, academic ability, and social class. Majority of the student participants were from government schools while only a small proportion of students had had private schooling till the secondary level. The schooling background of students, to an extent, corresponded with their social class (Table 4.5). Although government schooling was quite common among students from all the three class categories, private schooling was limited to those from the LMC and LCU. While the students coming from families with marginal incomes largely opted for government schools, the students from families with more stable incomes often went for private schooling at the primary or upper primary levels. Private schooling till the secondary school level was largely for those students from lower-middle social class. Within the lower middle class too, a higher proportion of children of low professionals had attended private secondary schools as compared to ones whose parents were engaged in small business and clerical occupational categories.

Table 4.5

Schools Attended by Social Class

Schooling Background[a]	Social Class							
	LMC		LCU		LCL		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
All Govt	21	36	29	64	16	100	66	56
Pvt-Govt-Govt	22	38	14	31	0	0	36	30
Pvt-Pvt-Govt	14	24	2	4	0	0	16	13
Govt-Pvt-Govt	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	58	100	45	99	16	100	119	100

Note. [a]See Table 3.3 for explanation of the categories employed under schooling background.

Most private schools in Rhenock were low-cost ones with minimal infrastructure.[83] The teachers recruited in the private schools were often less experienced and less qualified

[83] Only one private secondary school, a missionary institution, was equipped with better infrastructure than the other schools in the area. This school was the one chosen by higher income families from the lower middle classes for their children's education. The students at GSR who had studied in private schools till their secondary level were largely from this particular school.

than those in the government schools. Despite the infrastructure and the quality of teachers, there was a preference for private schools. In their interviews, many parents and students believed that private school teachers "worked harder" to ensure "better results" or higher levels of learning among the students. Toney's (2015) study of a private and a government school in a rural area in Sikkim had similar observations.

The private low-cost schools, thus, provided an alternative for lower income families looking to address the "poor" quality of education offered in government schools. Most of these schools offered education only till the primary or upper-primary levels. Interestingly, this corresponded with the dominant idea held by the parents that private schooling at the lower levels of schooling was adequate to give the students a strong foundation required later. Government schools, in turn, provided the 'best' education in the senior levels. "Government schools are best for higher level as they have more experienced and qualified teachers. Private schools are good when the children are young as they focus on each student and make sure everyone works hard," stated one parent (M, LMC, clerical). In addition to the individual attention given to the students, the idea about private schools endowing students with better English language skills was another dominant theme in the parent and student narratives. This focus on English language was seen as lacking in government schools. However, despite such perceptions, schooling choices were often informed by what was available to the families within the context of their locational and socio-economic constraints.

The criticism about government schools were mostly directed at primary level education. Even the senior teachers in GSR pointed at the problem of primary education in government schools. Ms. Lydia (F, Gen, teacher) stated that English was rarely used in classroom teaching at the junior levels. Further, the non-usage of English language at home was seen as detrimental to increasing the proficiency of students in English, "The grooming is not there from the primary level. Although the medium of instruction is English, you know how it is in government schools. English is rarely used in the school. And the same happens at home," said Ms. Lydia. The mathematics and science teachers in the senior school had similar concerns about the lack of foundational skills, in their respective subjects, in students with government education at the lower levels.

Few teachers linked the low academic competency of government school students to the relaxed evaluation in the lower classes. According to them, the no-detention policy whereby students were promoted from one class to the next without thorough evaluation of their level of skills and knowledge posed major setback. This resulted in students reaching senior classes without the adequate skills required for the higher-level curriculum. New

policies like Right to Education (RTE) and Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) were held responsible. The low engagement of the teachers with these top-down policies coupled with the fear of being "blamed for everything" (Hargreaves and Lo, 2000, p. 170) was seen as a hindrance to proper evaluation of the students starting from the lower classes. A senior teacher, Mr. Rajiv (M, Hum), talked about the risk faced by the government schoolteachers, "Things like the RTE has made everyone very cautious. If a teacher makes a mistake in evaluation, that mistake may ruin the teacher's life. Teachers are very careful about failing students nowadays."

The home environment of students studying in government schools was also seen as another contributing factor to low student achievement by some teachers. The teachers felt that majority of the students did not study at home and depended solely on the classroom teaching. A related theme that emerged was around the participation of parents in their children's education. "They (the parents) think that once they admit their children, it is the job of the school to take care of everything related to their studies," was the response of Mr. Anil (M, Com, teacher) when asked about involvement of the guardians.

Parents of government and private school students were often differentiated based on their engagement in schoolwork, with the former being less engaged and the latter more so. Interestingly, free, or subsidized education in government school was cited by some as being responsible for the "laid-back" behaviour of the parents. The economic investment made by the parents in private schools, purportedly, rendered them "more involved" in the academic life of their child.[84]

The rural location was also seen as being partly responsible for the low academic competency of the students. Teachers felt that studying in a rural environment made the students complacent as it did not foster competition among them. This complacency, according to some teachers, was felt in their plans for the future as well. The students' "low" expectations and goals seemed to influence the teachers' expectations too. Ms. Lydia (F, Gen, teacher) states:

> I think living in a rural area limits their exposure to many things. They think after finishing class ten, they will go to eleven. What I mean is that they don't have long

[84] I had first come across this argument during my preliminary fieldwork in the interview narratives of government officials and educators in Sikkim and interestingly, found it being reiterated by teachers and even some of the students in the field.

term goals. We don't expect too much from them as well. I think I just want them to pass the class they are currently in.

Although Rhenock was largely rural, the concept of rurality, in some teacher narratives, corresponded with student "backwardness" and government school education. In one such narrative, Mr. Dhiraj (M, Gen, teacher), while talking about the "mix" of students at GSR, the students who were from "*basti*" (a term that translates into village), referring to those students coming from the surrounding villages, were seen as feeling "inferior" to their peers who were from the "English medium schools"[85], referring to those from private schools located closer to the bazaar area:

> One advantage we have in this school is that some surrounding English medium school students come here. That may be a good sign because the students coming from the *basti* develop an inferiority complex which motivates them to learn more. That kind of competition has to be there.

The teachers also felt that it was too late for many students to catch up. Mr. Suman (M, Sci, teacher), strongly remarked, "They do try but the time for that is gone. They come to the senior class and try to learn everything all at once and that is going to be very difficult."

Thus, at GSR, the dominant notion among teachers about privately schooled children being "better" led to a differentiation between the students based on their prior schooling backgrounds. The students coming from government schools (both GSR students and those who joined later) were seen as lagging in terms of their academic performance. Meanwhile, those who had studied in private institutions till the secondary level, were regarded as being more academically capable. These students were perceived as being more confident and articulate. Few of the students shared that during classroom discussions, the teachers would pick the students coming from private schools more than the ones from the government schools to participate. Also, a higher number of students from the private schools were represented in the more "academically demanding" streams of science and commerce than in the humanities and vocational studies (see Table 4.4). Armed with more *cultural capital* (regarding proficiency in the English language, general awareness, and other skills), the students from the private schools were, thus, understood to be better equipped to face the academic pressure of the senior level curriculum.

Many students with government schooling background did assert that studying in government school had been a good choice. Archana (F, Com, LCU) said that government

[85] Ironically, all government schools in Sikkim were English medium schools.

and private schools were “same same” and for Jeevan (M, Com, LCU) government schools were even “better” then private schools. However, a few of them had misgivings and regrets about their government schooling background. Deepak (M, Com, LMC) felt that not being fluent in English was a major problem for him, especially in the senior classes. If given a second chance, both he and his parents would have certainly opted for private schools. His mother, a housewife, shared:

> Very few parents were admitting their children in private schools back then, and now, I feel we should have done the same. There is a big difference between government and private schools. The private school students can speak up. They are very good in English.

Self- perceptions about being “inferior” to their privately schooled peers were also quite palpable in some accounts of students who had studied in government schools. “Overall, private school students are better. I am not so good at schoolwork. Even in terms of general knowledge, they are more aware than we are,” said Ashish (M, Hum, LMC). Thupden (M, Voc, LCU) was more descriptive in his account. While talking about the students at GSR, he highlighted the differences between them, “Some of the students are from well-off background, children of big people. There are differences, in their language, clothes, the way they walk around. I don’t like that so much.”

Interestingly, some students who had come to GSR from private schools had a different opinion. Many were dismissive of any kind of differences between the students. For some, studying in GSR, after being in private schools, was a freeing experience. Rishab (M, Sci, LMC), son of a teacher, did not seem to appreciate the constant monitoring of students in private schools. While comparing his experience at GSR with his prior school, he said, “Here, I got to grow as a person. It was not like that in my old school. There, we used to be spoon-fed like a baby. In private schools, we have to just give money, and everything is arranged for us.”

Rishab’s experience at GSR was qualitatively different from that of Deepak’s. While Deepak was navigating the senior class curriculum with doubts and regrets, for Rishab, it facilitated his independence and made him self-reliant. What is interesting is that although both Rishab and Deepak belonged to the lower-middle class category, Rishab’s father was a teacher while Deepak’s worked as a Group D government employee. While Rishab attended a private school till his secondary level, Deepak had had an all-government schooling. This indicates that even within the same social class, there were likely to be variations in student schooling choices and experiences, depending on the nature of economic security of the

family, and occupation and educational level of the previous generation. GSR, to some extent, accentuated these differences by ranking the students based on the amount of *cultural capital* possessed by them.

'Merit-based' selection and ranking of streams. The schooling background of the senior school students was not the only ranking system prevalent at GSR. As we shall discuss next, the generalised assessment of students based on the streams they were enrolled in added another layer to the hierarchy between students. As we already know, there was a "merit-based" selection of students for the science and commerce streams. This selection process at GSR created another ranking of students, this time based on the streams they were enrolled in. The science students were at the top of this ranking, followed by commerce, humanities, and vocational studies.

Table 4.6

Schools Attended by Stream

Stream	Schooling Background									
	All Govt		Pvt-Govt-Govt		Pvt-Pvt-Govt		Govt-Pvt-Govt		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Humanities	**31**	**46**	**15**	**42**	3	19	1	100	50	42
Science	10	15	12	33	**7**	**44**	0	0	29	24
Commerce	21	32	5	14	5	31	0	0	31	28
Vocational	4	6	4	11	1	6	0	0	9	8
Total	66	99	36	100	16	100	1	0	119	100

There was also some correlation of this ranking with the previous differentiation of the private school students from those who had studied in government schools. As we can see in Table 4.6, among the student participants, the students with a history of private schooling (especially those who studied in private schools till the secondary level) were proportionately more in science (followed by commerce). Those from government schools were represented in a greater proportion in the humanities stream.

There were certain perceptions and stereotypes about the streams and the students enrolled in them. Science was viewed as "toughest" of all the streams to study. Commerce was moderately demanding in terms of academic requirements. Humanities was "easy" or, in the words of many students, "easier than science or commerce." In GSR, the stream of

vocational studies was introduced in 2004, and it offered only horticulture as the main subject. The School was keen to increase enrolment in the vocational studies program, but the students were ambivalent about it. Teachers at GSR had counselled students to take up vocational studies as it offered them a chance at self-employment by becoming entrepreneurs if they did not get a job in the future. The vocational stream was offered to those with low percentages in the class X board examinations and can also be seen as a space to absorb students away from the over-burdened humanities stream. Upon being asked why he chose vocational studies, Thupden (M, Voc, LCU) stated, "My percentage in class ten was quite low. Sir and all told me it was good to take up vocational as it will be good for later, for college and jobs. They showed us some hope…."

According to the teacher accounts, just like the difference between the privately schooled and government schooled students, the science and the humanities students were also at opposite ends of the performance continuum. The science students were considered more "intelligent", "diligent" and "hardworking." In contrast, the students in the humanities (and vocational studies) were seen to be "weak" in academics and "indifferent" to their studies. The commerce students were placed in the middle. As Ms. Roshni (F, general subject) pointed out:

> There are lots of differences between the science and the arts (humanities) class. The science students are much better, in terms of their English language skills, in terms of grasping what is being taught, and also in terms of participation in the class. The arts students are much, much, much weaker. I think that my level of teaching really comes down when I enter the arts class. I tend to oversimplify, more of spoon-feeding, which is not what you are supposed to do in class XII. With science, it's different. I engage in more of discussions and things like that.

The science students were also seen as being more concerned about their future. According to the teachers, the science students often came to them and discussed their future plans. "Science students are quite conscious and self-aware, and the others are nowhere," remarked Mr. Suman (M, Sci), "They ask about IIT and other entrance exams. Some commerce students also enquire about getting into BBA, IIM, etc. But the arts students, they do not seem bothered about what they are going to do next."

The school authorities also made special allowances for the science students regarding their studies. They held the notion that students in science required more academic attention than the rest. There were instances when the science students were encouraged to focus on academics while the rest of the students were made to participate in other extra-curricular

events. Rinchen (F, Sci, LMC) stated, “Since we (the science students) had more to study, on special occasions like the preparations for the 15th August celebrations, our classes would continue while the others had to go down to the field and practice for the event.”

Students were quite aware of teachers’ perceptions about them. Some of the humanities students openly expressed that they did not like the way in which they were looked at by teachers. Riya (F, Hum, LCL) felt that the teachers’ treatment of the humanities students was quite discriminatory. In her words, “They (the teachers) seem to hate the arts students. We are ignored and not treated well. They are nice to the science students, and even the ones from commerce. But they make us feel like humanities is low, while science is way up there.”

These distinctions and hierarchies constructed at GSR were based on the perceptions of the knowledge and skills an individual student brought to the senior classroom. In a stratified system of education, there appeared to be a strong correlation between student’s social class, schooling history and, thereby, his or her “ability.” The School, then, can be seen as playing an active role in reproducing not merely the inequalities of the larger society but creating new hierarchies based on “merit” and stream choices.

Role of school in student aspirations and choices: A summary. By placing students on a hierarchy based on academic abilities, the School narrowed the range of choices and thereby the aspirational window of the students. The policy of merit-based selection of the students to various streams, which was due to both infrastructural constraints and academic aptitude required of the students, deprived many of the chance to take up the more desired streams. Some of the student accounts revealed that taking up the ‘lower down’ streams of humanities and vocational studies was not something they wanted but that they were left with no choice. According to Ashish (M, Hum, LMC), “I actually wanted to study science, but I was not able to because of my percentage in class 10. After that, I applied for commerce, but by then, the commerce capacity was full. So, I was forced to take arts.”

Apart from the institutional policy of merit-based selection for streams constraining the students’ choices, the overall environment of the School was also important to the choices and aspirations of the school students. The low focus on academics and poor learning context in GSR often found expression in the way the students perceived themselves and their further educational plans. To add to that, the prevalent perceptions about the students and their academic quality was quite prominent in the student interview narratives. On closer interrogation, the high aspirations quoted by the students for higher education was often seen to be filled with doubts and anxieties about one’s academic potential, in many of the student

interview narratives. Many students, especially in the humanities, shared that although they would have liked to pursue further education, they were not sure about their academic ability to do so. Most of the students, including the "diligent" science students, said that they were very worried about their performance in the final board exams.

The School also had some positive influence on the students' choices and aspirations. GSR, despite its shortcomings, gave the students a sense of the importance of education in their lives. For the students, education was extremely important not just for instrumental ends but also, in their own words, for "better life", "making life easy", "success and "understanding many things like the current situation in the country." The students believed that the more they studied, the "better" it was for them. This, in a way, reflected in the high aspirations the students held for their further studies.

More substantially, the School provided information and advice about the future options available to the students. The senior schoolteachers often counselled the students about various career options and competitive exams. GSR also organised career counselling sessions and invited resource persons to the school. The newly recruited post graduate teachers in GSR, who were in the younger age cohort, were known among the students to be approachable and friendly. These young teachers often interacted with the students and talked to them about the IITs, IIMs, and universities outside. The teachers also presented a viable employment option for the students to work towards, that of teaching. Almost one-fourth of the students in the survey wanted to be teachers in the future. In the in-depth interviews, the students who wanted to become teachers also specified subjects they wanted to teach. These subjects were often the subjects taught by their "favourite" teacher in the School. Hence, some teachers can be seen as playing quite an important role in the planning process of the students at GSR.

However, there appeared to be a mismatch between the students' educational aspirations and future career plans (see St. Clair et al., 2013, for similar observations). The higher educational pathways desired by many students were not concrete or aligned to their subject choices or their future employment goals. There was instances of uncertainty and confusion in their future plans. Archana (F, Com, LCU) stated that she wanted to become a 'big officer' or a 'social worker' in the future. She wanted to study law after getting her bachelor's degree in commerce. When asked why she wanted to do both, she stated, "I want to do B.Com. because I like accountancy and also law because I like it too." Tashi (M, Hum, LMC) wanted to become an 'IPS officer' and upon being asked how he planned to work towards his goal, he gave a sheepish grin and stated, "I have no idea." Besides many other

factors that possibly contributed to the students being uncertain about their future, it often seemed like their planning process was not backed by a proper evaluation of how their academic strength, individual interests, the choice of subjects taken, and occupational goals fitted with each other. The counselling provided by the School and the schoolteachers was, therefore, not adequate as it often did not take into consideration the needs and desired trajectories of the individual students. Despite high aspirations, many students seemed to lack the knowledge of the pathways to achieve them.

The family. The role of the family in translating student aspirations into actual outcomes emerged as an important theme in the in-depth interviews of the students and their parents. In this section we shall first elaborate on the social class background of the students and their families and move on to other aspects of family dynamics that were important in shaping the future pathways of the student participants.

Socio-economic background. As discussed earlier, GSR catered to students coming from families residing in Rhenock and nearby places. Students from upper and the middle classes who usually have residences and access to schools in Gangtok and other bigger towns, inside and outside Sikkim, are not represented among the participants. As shown in Chapter 3, students largely came from the lower middle class (49 per cent), the lower class (upper) (38 per cent) and lower class (lower) (13 per cent) social classes. Although the socioeconomic range of these three social classes is not very wide, there were variations in the economic, cultural, or social capital possessed by the families belonging to the various occupational groups that made up these classes.

Within the lower middle classes, almost half of the students had fathers working in the lower-level salaried or clerical occupations (mostly Class III and IV employees). This occupational group was also the largest (28 out of 119 students) within the sample. Within this category, the educational level of the parents was mostly till upper primary or secondary school. Except for one (a mother who had completed graduation), none of the parents had gone for higher studies. Two of the students within the clerical category had fathers with only primary level education. During the 1980s and 1990s in Sikkim, with the rapid expansion of the bureaucracy, lower-level government jobs were quite easily available. Primary and upper primary level schooling was adequate to apply for these jobs within the state government. Over the years, however, the educational qualifications required for such positions have drastically increased. This occupational group, the clerical employees, are those with some stability of income, being formal sector workers, but have low level of participation in

education. The students in this category have attended either government schools throughout or private schools till the primary level.

The next group within the lower middle class, also the second largest group (20 out of 119) within the entire sample, are students whose parents are engaged in small business or entrepreneurship. Within this group, one-third of the students were from the Marwari and Bihari business community who had shops and small businesses in the bazaar area. The rest had parents who either had small businesses or were contractors. Except for two (undergraduate) fathers, most of the parents in this group had attained only school level education. Three of the students belonging to this category were the first generation to go to school. Like the previous group, the students in this category were divided into those with all government schooling and those with private primary schooling. However, few (4) of the students had done private schooling till the secondary level.

The final occupational category within the lower middle social class was that of students whose parents worked as low professionals. The parents were mostly schoolteachers and mid-level government employees. They comprised of a small number (10 out of 119) of students. The educational level of the parents was till the secondary school level or higher. 2 (one father and one mother) were undergraduates, while 2 fathers were postgraduates. Except for one student, most of the students in this category had done private schooling either till the secondary or primary level.

The lower class (upper) comprised those with parents engaged in petty business, skilled and semi-skilled manual, and small farmers. The small farmer category was the biggest (19 students out of 119) group in this category. The highest level of education attained by the parents were till the secondary school level. Seven students were first generation to go to school. Looking at the schooling background of the students in this category, almost two-thirds of the students had attended government schools throughout, and one-third had been to private primary schools. The small farmer category had the highest number (9) of students who had gone for private schooling at the primary level. Two students each from the petty business and skilled/semi-skilled manual category had attended private schools till the secondary level.

The third category, lower class (lower), had the lowest number (16) of students among all the three social classes, comprising only 13 per cent of the entire sample. Most of the students in this category came from families where the parents were low agriculturalists. Four students had parents who were not employed and only one in the unskilled manual job. Ten of the students in this category were first generation to go to school. Regarding the

parents' level of education, barring one (father had studied till the secondary level), the highest level of education attained was the upper primary level. All students from this social class had attended only government schools.

Here, it is important to note the differences between the small farmers and the low agriculturalists. Although both worked as cultivators, the low agriculturalists were either tenant farmers or landless agricultural workers, while the small farmers owned land, although many were marginal farmers. Within, the context of Sikkim, this differentiation is quite significant because of the property ownership laws restricts the sale and ownership of land to those without a domiciled status. Also, due to subsequent land reforms (see Lama, 2001: 45-46), especially the Lank Bank Scheme of 1995, the erstwhile landless Sikkimese have been donated with some land (half an acre) by the state government. This may explain the fact that the largest share of landholders in Sikkim are the marginal farmers (Lama, 2001). In addition, as they have domiciled status, the small farmers enjoy the various privileges extended by the government in education and employment. State quotas for higher education institutions, various scholarships, and subsidies, and of course, the promise of jobs within the state government were some of these privileges. This was not the case for the low agriculturalists, majority of whom are migrants or those without the domiciled status.

Another important categorisation of the students and their families is based on status as the domiciled or non-domiciled in Sikkim. Tas mentioned, the Bihari and Marwari business families, the migrants from the neighboring areas of West Bengal, and older residents of Sikkim without the requisite certification did not have domiciled status. They were hence excluded from the facilities given by the state to the domiciled citizens. To counter these disadvantages, the non-domiciled often had to be self-reliant and have an adequate amount of economic capital (as can be seen among the Bihari and Marwari business families) or hold relatively stable income jobs. Thus, within the sample, the non-domiciled, marginal workers can be said to be the most disadvantaged of all the categories.

Family and students' choices and aspirations. The students at GSR largely denied the role of parents in their educational choices and decisions. Majority of the student interviewees stated that their choices were made autonomously without the influence of parents, teachers or even their peer groups. The parents also echoed the same, stating that they did not intervene in either the stream choices or the higher educational aspirations of their children. Despite these claims, the choices and aspirations of the students were found to be influenced by certain motivations and constraints arising from the home environment.

Financial resources. Stream choices, higher educational and occupational aspirations were, to some degree, tailored according to the future costs involved. Financial resources were a major consideration for the students while charting out their post-school plans. The students were, in a way, making choices that would best suit their individual family circumstances.

While most students, in the in-depth interviews, spoke about their choices and aspirations asserting a considerable amount of individual agency, there were a few among them who talked about the monetary constraints faced by them and how it molded their choices. Riya (F, Hum, LCL) lived with her mother and her brothers. Her mother, a low agriculturalist, was a widow and supported the family by selling milk and vegetables. One of her brothers worked as a security guard in Gangtok while the other did odd jobs around Rhenock. Riya was very wary of the limitations she faced because of her family's economic situation. While talking about her stream choices, Riya's first preference had been for science as she wanted to pursue medicine. She, however, took up humanities because of the costs involved in pursuing a medical degree. She knew that her family would not be able to support her if she had to go out of the state to study. Humanities gave her the option to continue her higher education in the degree college in Rhenock:

> I had first filled out the form for science. But then I thought about it. I realized that we might face financial problems if I study science and have to go for further training and all. Since childhood, I had liked humanities too. So, I changed the form and signed up for humanities instead.

At times, the parents clearly demarcated what was possible and what was not. Deepa's (F, Hum, LCU) situation was similar to Riya but in Deepa's (F, Hum, LCU) case, her father, a taxi-driver, had told her that the only option available to her for college was to attend the one in Rhenock. As the college offered a degree only in the arts subjects, Deepa had to take up humanities although she was initially interested in commerce. According to her father, he made the decision because he saw no point in going out of Rhenock when it had a college of its own.

Worries about the future for some revolved solely around their financial circumstances. In few cases, the family support was lacking. Sara (F, Com, LCL) lived in a children's home run by a local NGO. The children's home was located near GSR and majority of the students who stayed there went to GSR. The home admitted those who were either orphaned or came from families from lower socio-economic background. Sara did not have a father, and her mother, an agricultural worker, had remarried. Her relatives had

admitted her to the children's home, and she rarely went home, often staying back in the children's home even during her vacations. Her biggest worry about her future was for her further education, and upon being asked why, she stated, "Because there is no economic support, I worry if I have to leave my studies."

Compared to students like Riya, Deepa, and Sara, most of the students coming from the lower-middle class did seem to enjoy more flexibility in making choices at school. The choices and aspirations of the latter were based on more individualistic factors such as their interests and academic aptitude rather than family resources. Nevertheless, for some, worries and anxieties over the expenditure for their higher education was also a concern. Economic capital, as discussed before, was not evenly distributed within a social class category. Individual family dynamics also played a major role in determining what amount of the family's economic resources was made available for the children's education. The larger the number of dependents on the family's income, the tougher it was for the lower middle-class family to be able to put aside resources for the education of the younger generation. Raju (M, Hum, LMC) lived in a large family of eight, comprising of his grandparents, his parents, his brother, his sister, and a cousin. The only earning member in the family was his father, a policeman. Raju's post-school plan was to start working parttime while simultaneously attending college. Although he wanted to go to Siliguri for his further studies, he was also considering staying back in Rhenock and attending the college there. The responsibilities entailed in being the eldest son and the urgency to contribute to the family's income shaped his narrative about the future to a large degree.

Information flow and networks: Siblings, relatives, and family connections. Apart from the school, information about the viable educational and career options were often provided by the more educated family members, relatives, neighbors, and family friends. The students regarded this information as more reliable as it was based on the experience of those they knew.

In a small number of families, usually belonging to the lower-middle class where parents had relatively higher levels of education, the fathers or the mothers were the primary advisors. These parents, however, took the aptitude and academic potential of their children into consideration. Rishab's (M, Sci, LMC) parents quoting a case of someone from their locality "forcing" their child to take science resulting in the child failing, said that parents had to be mindful of what their son or daughter was capable of. Priya's father, a lower-level government employee, said, "I really admire doctors and wanted my daughter to study

medicine. But she did not get science because her marks were not good. So, she has taken up arts instead. I guess that's okay."

Stream choices, educational destination preferences and future career plans sometimes mirrored that of their older siblings. In many families it was the older siblings and relatives who played a major role. The sibling who had gone for higher education provided not just advice and information about various options available but also widened the educational pathways for the younger ones to follow. Parents were generally seen to be more confident about sending their children to study outside Rhenock, or even Sikkim, if an older sibling had already done so. Sudeep (M, Sci, LMC) came from a Bihari business family. His elder brother was working in a corporate company based in Bangalore. On the advice of his brother, he had taken up science and wanted to go to Bangalore to study engineering. Sudeep was provided with the necessary support system and security to study outside by his brother and his parents seemed very comfortable with the idea of sending him out of the state. This was not the case for those who were the first in the family to go out for higher education. They often looked at a near relative for such advice and information. Archana (F, Com, LCU) had been encouraged to take up commerce by her older cousin, a bank employee. In her words, "My cousin told me to take up commerce because it has a lot of employment options in the future."

More affluent relatives also played an important role in providing options for higher education to the students. Roshan (M, Hum, LCU) stated that he wanted to study in the college in Gangtok and stay with his uncle, his father's older brother, who was a bureaucrat. Neighbors and locality members also provided some amount of cushioning to the students to aspire to go out of Rhenock to study. Many students followed in the footsteps of seniors and friends within the locality. Parents were more willing to send their children for further studies to places that already had someone from the locality living there.

In some cases, however, the experiences of older siblings and family members negatively influenced the students' choice of subjects and future educational plans. This was the case for two female students, Anjali and Rinchen. Anjali (F, Hum, LCU) wanted to opt for commerce, but did not do so because her older sister, who had taken this stream, had not done well. For Rinchen (F, Sci, LMC), her older sister's inability to complete her course in a college outside Sikkim had blocked her own opportunity to study outside. Her parents intended to send her to a college in Sikkim, citing the older sibling's failed attempt. Her mother, a housewife, felt that if the children were studying close to home, it was easier to

look after and monitor them. Her mother justified the decision by stating, “Those who have studied in Sikkim have also done well. We have so many examples in our own place.”

Due to their rural location, the students and the parents were also aware of lack of awareness and information about various opportunities. Tashi’s (M, Hum, LMC) mother, a housewife, shared her concern:

> Making them study in a place like Rhenock has its drawbacks. Here we don’t come to know about so many things happening in Gangtok and places outside. Our children do not have the exposure to many things. They lose out on a lot of opportunities. Here, we come to know everything late. By the time we find out about something, it is often too late to do anything.

Parental expectations, social values, and anxieties. The worldviews held by the parents were very interesting for the study as they revealed certain expectations and anxieties that their children had to keep in mind while making their choices and decisions. The young people’s plans had to be situated within the value system of their families too.

Expectations of financial support from their children in the future were voiced by some parents. Sujata’s (F, Hum, LCL) mother, an agricultural worker, stated, “I am hoping that she studies a bit and get some kind of job so that she can take care of me.” However, the straightforward voicing of future expectations from the younger generation were not just limited to those from the lower social classes. Gopal’s (M, Com, LMC) father, a Bihari businessman, also stated quite clearly that his children need to help the parents in the future, “They (the children) do realize that their father has put all their earnings on them. When they start earning themselves, they know that they should do something for us (the parents) as well.”

The parents with more stable incomes and higher levels of education articulated their expectations differently. These accounts focused on other aspects. Puran’s (M, Sci, LMC) parents were not looking for any financial support from their children. His parents had a small business and some landed property. His father had studied till the undergraduate level and his mother till the secondary school level. His mother stated the following:

> He should do better than what we have done. He should become a leader and not work under others. This is what we want from him. We don’t expect him to take care of us. We will be able to sustain ourselves as our needs are small. We have done the best and provided the best we could for him. Now, he will have to take it a step further.

The students, in general, wanted to be able to look after their families in the future, but for the students from the lower classes, the urgency to do so was greater. The latter were

often clear about the need to start earning soon. Although that often contradicted with their high educational aspirations, some of them hoped that they just might be able manage studying while working at the same time.

The sibling order, the number of children and the number of dependents in the family also shaped parental expectations. Older siblings were often made responsible for shouldering the financial burden of the family. Raju and Archana, both of whom have been quoted earlier, felt the pressure of being older siblings. For Raju, being the eldest son in a large household with only his father working, was something that constantly weighed on his mind. Raju's mother, a housewife, had high expectations from her son. She pointed out, "His father will be retiring soon, and he will have to get a job before that."

Although the expectation to support the family was traditionally greater on the male child, in Archana's case, it was being the oldest of two daughters. Her father ran a petty shop. The family lived in a small room behind the shop. While Archana's parents wanted both the daughters to study further, her father had doubts about how long that would be possible, "I really want them to study further, but I have to look at my situation too. Ideally, I want to provide for her as long as they want to study." In turn, Archana's sense of responsibility towards her parents was obvious, "My duty is to look after my parents in the future. I am their son and also their daughter."

While one's identity as a Sikkimese brought certain advantages it also led to parental expectations to value rootedness to the native place. This paradoxically limited the options for the students' further educational destination, and their future place of work. Pema's (F, Com, LMC) father worked as a lower-level government employee in Gangtok while her mother was a housewife. In her interview, Pema's mother said that the decisions regarding the children's education were primarily made by her husband. Her account reveals the importance of being Sikkimese and how her husband wanted Pema to remain within the state given the importance of applying for jobs in Sikkim when vacancies come up. In her words, "My husband wants her to study inside Sikkim. He says it is safe and that she will be aware of the various job vacancies in Sikkim. He says that they will eventually have to live here and work here since we are from here." Pema has accepted her parents' decision and was planning to apply for the degree college in Gangtok. The expectation to stay inside Sikkim was also accentuated by small family size. Being the only child, especially a son, made the expectation to work inside Sikkim was even greater. This was the case with Tashi (M, Hum, LMC). According to Tashi's mother (housewife), "He is the only son and I tell him not to think too big. He has to think about where his family comes from and then take that forward."

Wierenga (2011:374) in her study of young men's transitions in rural Tasmania argues for "alternative cultural frames of reference" that takes cognizance of meaning and identity rather than overemphasizing the importance of the "autonomous individual" in young people's transitions. Writing about working class parents in her field area, she states, "a vital part of good parenting is manifest through providing the options by which young people can stay close and through which care can be extended in day-to-day ways." The same sentiment was captured by Archana's father (LCL, petty business), "It would have been good if Rhenock had more (higher educational) options and our children could go to college from home. Nothing compares to going to class with your belly full of hot, home-cooked meal."

While the domiciled students were expected to stay back and work inside Sikkim, the non-domiciled knew they may have to look for employment options outside the state. Private sector employment in Sikkim was quite limited and government employment was available only to the domiciled Sikkimese. As was the case with the Bihari and Marwari business families, the younger generation often went outside the state to study and even work. Though their parents were not domiciled Sikkimese, but they were economically in a better position than most parents in the sample. They also had an advantage of possessing social networks and connections outside the state.

Families belonging to the lower classes had migrated from outside Sikkim, especially the neighboring areas of West Bengal, faced many constraints. Young people coming from these families were conscious of their disadvantage and often aspired for jobs with the central government or outside the state. The feeling of exclusion was described by Arpita (F, Hum, LCU), "Sikkim is good and peaceful, but the people of Sikkim are selfish. Not all of them but some of them are like that. They think people coming from Bengal are outsiders, but people should not think like that. We are all the same."

Expectations of parents were also tied to the larger societal values they held. Living in tightly knit rural communities, social norms and obligations were an important part of their lives. For some, especially for the "upper" caste Nepalis, caste rules and regulations were very important. Marrying within the caste and to be able to live with "respect" within the society was highlighted by Puran's parents who were from the Bahun community. For others, it was more generic values of helping those in need, being there for the community and taking care of one's village.

Baker (2016) points at how moral meanings are attached to parental expectations and thereby youth aspirations. In his study of youth from disadvantaged neighborhoods in England, he found that parents were not only concerned about "the material rewards" brought

about by education but that "educational achievement and aspirations were also central to their broader accounts of the life they wanted their children to live, and the sort of person they wanted to become" (2015: 7). Some of the parents in the current study too expected their children to weave together their future goals with the ideals of social service and altruistic work. This issue was highlighted by Rishab's parents (LMC, low professional and clerical) in their interview. His mother stated:

> Both of us (she and her husband) try and help the society the best we can. We want him to learn that. Tomorrow, whether he becomes a doctor or an engineer, we want him to devote at least one day a week to help the poor and the needy. He too agrees with us.

Archana's father (LCU, petty business) had a similar perspective:

> After my children study and get a job, I do not expect them to buy land, build a house, purchase a car, and enjoy their life. Being educated members of the society, they should try and take their society and their country forward. They should try and improve themselves, their family, and their village.

Beside parents, majority of the students themselves wanted to be able to help others in society in the future. Pattenden (2013) drawing on Zignon's (2006) concept of "an ethics of hope", show how young people in South Africa coalesced the ideas about their possible futures with construction of moral self-identities. Wierenga (2011) also stresses on how young people seek "activity which is purposeful, socially useful and located amidst their significant social relationships" (p, 379-80). Similarly, the students from GSR, especially those from marginal socio-economic backgrounds, were quite articulate about the inequalities present in society and saw themselves working in the future to change the status quo. If we look back again at the data on the students' occupational aspirations, social work was seen as a desirable alternative for their future careers. Besides aiding in the formation of their moral self-identities, social work also served as a good fallback option considering an uncertain job market situation. This is quite evident in the case of Jeevan (M, Com, LCU), who held strong opinions about the "selfish" and "self-serving" people in society. His parents had a small teashop and he often helped them with the business. He ideally wanted to start a business with his friends in the future and, like many others, social work was his alternative ambition. When I asked him why he wanted to do social work, he replied:

> I want to work for the people. I want to be able to help them. You don't need money to do social work. If the poor people need something, then you just have to go to the big people and get money from them.

Apprehensions about the substantive change that had occurred in the contemporary world were also reflected in parent narratives. Although inflation and the new patterns of consumption were thought to be inevitable, they worried about how their children would survive in the rapidly changing landscape. Rinchen's (F, Sci, LMC) mother, a housewife, felt that for her daughter's generation it was going to be tough, "It is difficult for them. For us, it was just eat for today and go to sleep, but their generation expects more. Everything has become so costly so they will have to work really hard." Continuing in the same vein, Priya's father, a lower-level government employee, described the change that had occurred:

> The times have changed. Before an *ekra* house (traditional dwelling made from bamboo, mud, and straw) was good enough. Now you need a building. In front of the building, you have to have a car. Inside the house you need a television.

He further stated that for his daughter's generation to be able to meet the requirements of living in the world he had described, they had to be good at "everything: "They need to learn how to use computers. They must be good in studies, in sports, in music, and in dancing too. They should not be soft. They should be able to fight. They have to be strong."

Both Rinchen and Priya were from the lower-middle class and both of their fathers were in lower-level government service. The relative economic stability, probably, made the parents focus more on what lay ahead for their children. This was not the case with the students from the lower classes. Economic insecurity, low levels of education or illiteracy of the parents often made the parents themselves feel vulnerable to the changes taking place. In such families, there was a role reversal in the parent-child relationship. The younger generation were expected to lead the way for the family. For instance, Riya's mother (low agriculturalist) described how she often found herself lost in the contemporary world being a non-literate:

> In the world today, education is of utmost importance. I say this because we are not educated and when we go to the *bazaar,* we don't know anything. When we buy a ticket for a taxicab, they give us the ticket and tell us look at the ticket and find the particular vehicle. How are we to know what is written there (*laughs*)? Then we have to go look for someone who can help us (*laughing again*). We look at the *bot* (board/signposts) and it tells us the road leads to such and such place and we ask around, people will simply tell us, 'Just look at the *bot*, it's written there.'

For Riya's mother, because she was not able to go to school, she wanted her children to be educated so that they could guide her in life:

> When we were young, what occupied our minds were *ghaas* (grass, cutting grass), *daura* (wood, collecting wood), and to work the big fields of the landlords. So, I am educating them (her children), and they will help me see. Whatever I do not know they will teach me. And they are doing a lot, teaching a lot. Otherwise, who will do it? The other people just make fun. That is how the world is.

Thus, the first-generation school goers had many things to contend with. There was the task of steering their own educational pathways. For many from such families, the marginal economic background also added to the pressure on them to get employed soon. In addition, they were expected to give direction to the older generation and help the latter navigate the world.

Looking at gender: Perceptions and constraints. Gender was an important background factor that played out in the way the school students viewed themselves and the world around them. Among the participants, there was a marked difference in the levels of articulation and self-confidence between the male and the female students, with exceptions in both cases. While the male students were more comfortable, enthusiastic, and articulate, majority of the female students often found it difficult to relax in the interviews. Their responses were often short, and, many a time, probing questions would not yield much. The male students were also quite vocal in their criticisms about the School and about the place in general. They often illustrated their interview responses with jokes and anecdotes. The female students, on the other hand, were more formal and serious in their responses.

The teachers perceived the female students to be more "obedient", "hardworking", and "well mannered" than the male students. Besides some cases of early marriage and dating, the teachers said that female students did not pose as many disciplinary problems as their male peers.

Students' opinions of the opposite sex reveal that gendered perceptions were quite relevant in the formation of friendship circles and student identities. Most of the students tended to make friends with those of the same gender. The female students found their male peers to be "frank", "helpful", and "good as friends." Few female students felt that boys tended to be more "egoistic" and "boastful" while girls were "quiet" and "proved themselves without showing off." According to the male students, girls and boys were quite different in terms of "thinking." Some of the accounts of the male students described girls as "secretive" and "jealous." One student also said that girls engaged in "backbiting" and gossiping. Girls were also perceived to be limited in their social interactions because they stuck to their "own groups" while boys moved around and "made friends with everyone."

When it came to the issue of gender equality, most students believed that, compared to the past, women were in a better position and that both girls and boys were treated the same. Despite this, some of the high aspiring female students saw their futures as a platform to challenge gender norms. Shaliya (F, Com, LMC) came from a Bihari business family. She wanted to start her own "big" business in the future. Talking about the reasons for her goal, she stated, "I want to do it because people say that girls can't do business. They say you have to run here and there, and that girls can't do that."

Gendered expectations from the children put additional pressure on female students coming from families with no sons. In Archana's (F, Com, LCU) case, discussed earlier, having no sons in the family meant that she had to be both "a son and a daughter." She felt that such a commitment motivated her to work extra hard in her studies.

Ideas of gender equality were also dominant in the students' aspirations about marriage and family. Majority of the students wanted to earn as much as their future spouses would. One male student also stated that his future wife earning more than him would not be an issue. There were, however, some exceptions. Gendered norms did seem to seep into few of the student accounts. One student (M, Com, LCU) felt that if he had a stable job, his future wife need not work. As for the female students, one of them wanted her future spouse to earn more than her, and another stated that her future husband earning less than her was not desirable, "He will feel ashamed that the wife is earning more than him" (F, Com, LMC).

Gender was an important consideration for the parents when it came to decisions regarding higher educational destinations. Parents found it difficult to send daughters out to study. The preferred destinations were those that were located nearby. The financial constraints of going out to study for students from lower-income families was a reality for both male and female students, but more so for the latter. Even parents from the lower-middle class background felt that sending daughters out to study required more resources than it would for sons. They believed that ensuring that their daughters were safe and secure in their places of higher education required a higher economic investment. Shaliya's father (LMC, small business), "I worry about sending them out, to admit them in a hostel. I feel uncomfortable about it. Whether it will be a safe place or not. I get worried about it. When it comes to sons, they can stay anywhere. With daughters, the arrangement should be good. It has to be a good place."

The narratives and stories from the media and various news channels increased parental anxieties about sending daughters far. The incidents of human trafficking that had

taken place in Sikkim and other places was mentioned by Priya's father as adding to their worries.

> In *Crime Patrol* (a television show) they show how girls from small places are being lured to the cities with promises of well-paying jobs. Sometime my wife and I stay up till late at night thinking about it. We get so worried about sending our daughter out. (Priya's father, LMC, clerical)

Constraints on spatial mobility were often normalized in the student accounts. Archana's (F, Com, LCU) father ideally wanted her to go to the college in Rhenock, but since commerce was not offered there, they had decided on Gangtok where her relatives lived. According to Archana, it did not matter much as she felt that education was the "same" everywhere:

> When the colleges are nearby, it does not make sense to go out to study. To go outside and to stay back home is the same thing. Any place is good for studying. That is what I think. The most important thing is to get an opportunity to study. Whether you study outside or here, education remains the same.

Contrary to the parental attitudes, the survey (2011) indicates that majority (61 percent) of the female students stated their high preference to study outside Sikkim. The constraints on their physical mobility, however, had female students consider their subject choices and aspirations accordingly. As seen in streams chosen (see Table 4.2), instead of science and related professional courses for which they had to go outside the state, female students were most concentrated in humanities and commerce which offered higher educational choices in Rhenock or inside Sikkim.[86] This was seen in the case of Riya (F, Hum, LCL) and Deepa (F, Hum, LCU) discussed earlier. Riya did not take up science because of financial constraints and Deepa opted for humanities because her father wanted her study from home. Although financial constraints were there in both the families, gender is also an important factor to consider.

Career aspirations being considered by the students were mostly informed by the streams they were enrolled in. However, certain gendered ideas were implicit in their aspirations. For instance, a higher percentage of the female students wanted to pursue teaching and medicine. The female students also mentioned nursing, law, and interior design,

[86] The larger representation of female students in humanities also points at differential academic abilities between the male and the female students as the selection of students for the various streams was largely based on merit indicators.

all of which were absent in the male students' list of options. On the other hand, male students wanted to pursue more technical fields like engineering or joining the armed forces. Other career fields such as accountancy, business, banking, and administration were, however, distributed equally among both genders.

The higher educational landscape. The finalization of the students' post-school plans was contingent on the interplay of the students' academic performance, family resources and the availability of various higher educational options. During the end of 2011 and early 2012, the students at GSR were nearing their final board examination. The anxieties and worries were quite palpable in their interviews.

For those whose parents were working as low professionals or had small businesses, the families had planned to send their children out of Sikkim for higher studies, provided the children could secure the required marks to get admission. This was not the case for the others. Due to financial or academic constraints, majority of the students and their families felt that the most pragmatic decision about higher education was to choose an institution near home or inside Sikkim. This led to the government degree colleges of Sikkim being popular options. A stronger incentive not to venture out for higher studies was provided by the affiliation of the degree colleges to the then newly established central university, Sikkim University[87]. Among the degree colleges, the parents preferred the one located in Rhenock since that did not require the additional investment and anxiety to look for accommodation and security. For majority of the students, however, their first preference was the degree college in Gangtok or the one in Namchi instead of the one in Rhenock. That, of course, depended on their stream choice, academic performance, and family resources.

The students in the humanities were most likely to choose the college in Rhenock unless their performance in the final exams was above par and the family had the adequate financial resources and social networks, like siblings, relatives, and friends in Gangtok or Namchi who could help with accommodation and guidance. Going out of Rhenock for higher studies, as discussed, was more difficult for the female students than for the male students to negotiate with the parents.

For the commerce students, the families had to arrange to send the children out of Rhenock for higher studies, and the preferred destinations were the degree colleges in

[87] Sikkim University, the only central university in Sikkim, was established in 2007 with the passing of the Sikkim University Act 2006. All the government degree and various private colleges became affiliated to SU after its establishment. Earlier, the colleges in Sikkim were affiliated to North Bengal University, a state university in West Bengal.

Gangtok and Namchi which offered commerce. In rare cases, when the parents did not wish to do so, the students had to leave commerce and join the B.A. degree course in the college in Rhenock itself. This had happened to Anjali's (F, Hum, LCU) older sister, whom we have discussed earlier. Since her sister had mediocre marks in her board examinations and her father did not want to send her out for college, she had joined the college in Rhenock.

The science students can be divided into two broad categories, in terms of their higher educational plans: those planning to study professional and technical courses, and the others who wished to pursue a basic degree course. For the latter, the degree college in Gangtok was usually the preferred destination. The former can be subdivided into those who had the Sikkimese domicile and the ones who did not. The domiciled students had to appear for the Common Entrance Test (CET) held by the state government right after their board examinations. Depending on their performance in the CET and the board examination marks, the students were allotted seats in various professional colleges all over the country, in medicine, engineering, dentistry, veterinary sciences, pharmacy, and other allied fields. Those who did not perform well in the CET or get into the course of their choice could apply at the Sikkim Manipal University[88] or in private institutions outside Sikkim, provided the family had the financial resources to pay for private education. For the non-domiciled students, the families had to look outside for professional colleges. The students had to prepare for the national entrance examinations to the courses of their choice or opt for private universities and colleges.

The situation with students in the vocational studies, as it unfolded, was different from the others. Majority of the students in vocational studies were apprehensive about continuing with it. They complained that not having higher educational institutions in Sikkim was a major disadvantage. They pointed out that they were not made aware of the lack of affordable and proximate institutions to pursue their further studies in. As a result, many of the students wanted to discontinue their vocational training and seek admissions in the local degree college to study B.A. Few were also exploring other options. For instance, Thupden (M, Voc, LCU) had decided to discontinue with his stream and join the army. He complained, "Most of us are regretting it. It is because of the college problem. More than college, it is the economic problem. To go out and study is expensive." Another student, Naresh (M, Voc, LMC), who was also planning to discontinue his vocational stream and join

[88] Sikkim Manipal University is a private university established in 1998. It was the first university to be established in Sikkim. It has two technical institutions under it – Sikkim Manipal Institute of Technology [SMIT] and Sikkim Manipal Institute of Medical Sciences [SMIMS].

the college in Rhenock, reiterated the same, “It would have been easy if there were colleges in Sikkim but there aren’t any. Our teachers did not say anything. It was a great mistake.”

Conclusions

This chapter show how the young people from GSR, despite various odds, were trying to navigate the expected transition from school to higher education. There was an absence of middle and upper classes among those studying at GSR. They came mainly from the rural lower middle and lower social classes. Many were uncertain about the actual post-school pathways they were to take, but the guiding light for them was the promise of higher education inculcated into them by the school, the family, and the popular discourse around them. Resting on this very promise, the students weighed the various constraints, both real and perceived, to make educational plans and decisions that fitted into the socio-economic and other exigencies of their individual and family lives.

The School as a site of educational aspiration formation needs to be understood in a more critical manner. GSR had high student enrolment in the senior classes which resulted in overcrowded classrooms. GSR had, thus, adopted strict rules of streaming students into various subjects based on their academic abilities. Small number of higher academic performers were placed in the preferred science stream and the bulk of the students were accommodated into the less desired streams of commerce and humanities. Humanities, along with vocational studies, being the least preferred. The hierarchy of streams was accompanied by varying attitudes towards “good”, “hardworking”, and “diligent” students on one hand, and “weak” and “carefree” students on the other. As GSR catered to a relatively heterogenous student population coming from both the more upwardly mobile rural lower-middle classes to the lower classes, the study reveals that the hierarchies within the School, to a large degree, implicitly mirrored class inequalities. The “high performers” were largely those with private schooling background (prior to joining GSR) and came from more economically stable families with more educated parents, while those considered as “low performers” were mostly the students with an all-government schooling background and who came from marginal income families with relatively lower levels of educational participation. The privately schooled students were also seen by teachers as being more urbane as compared to their peers from government schools. The latter being from the “*basti*” (village), were “less capable” of handling the demands of the senior school curriculum. The presence of such hierarchies in the School did affect the students in how they viewed their academic potential and identities within the educational space.

For those coming from families with histories of low participation in education, the modern school is an important space wherein notions, identities, and evaluations about the self and education are made. Schools have been seen as a "contradictory resource," facilitating among the young "a sense of self as knowledgeable" as well as "a sense of self as failure" (Levinson & Holland,1996, p.1). The crucial implication of schools distinguishing some as "successes" and others as "failures", is that such practices was quite likely to impact students' confidence in their further educational choices and possibly outcomes (see St. Clair et al., 2013, p.735).

Another important finding in the School was the lack of infrastructure and overcrowded classrooms, especially in the subjects where majority of the academically weaker students were placed. Thus, providing a substantial learning environment was a major challenge. As narrated by some students, many of them went in and out of these classrooms without having learnt anything. With the GSR lacking the resources to provide a vibrant academic culture, majority of the students were just "hanging out" in the School without learning much. This was encouraged by the school environment which leaned more towards the aspects of student discipline and extra-curricular activities. The focus on academics was for the few "promising" students who had taken up the more challenging science stream. The School as an academic space was, thus, selectively inclusive. Most of the academically vulnerable students were often left on their own to figure out their learning process.

In decision making regarding further educational pathways, the family emerged as the most important site. The financial resources, information flow and social networks (especially the role of older, educated siblings), parental expectations and anxieties, and socio-cultural values all converged towards making certain futures possible for the young people. Drawing again on the distinction between "idealistic" and "realistic" aspirations made by Kintrea et al (2011) and St. Clair et al. (2013), we can argue that the School, the teachers and other influences, like the media for example, provided an array of choices contributing to the formation of "idealistic" aspirations, The family, on the other hand, with its varied stocks of *capital* and lived experiences of the family members, provided the students more "realistic" aspirations.

What finally emerges from this chapter is that for a small minority of students coming from the more economically stable families, (especially those with parents who were low professionals or had small businesses) and with a relatively higher level of academic competency, post-school pathways and options were likely to open more widely than for those who were from the marginal income families. For the bulk of the students, faced with

multiple constraints, the sudden opening of higher educational opportunities in Sikkim (and in Rhenock) presented new opportunities. Although studying inside Sikkim was not what majority of the students had earlier imagined their post-school educational trajectory to be, it complied with the expectation of the "normal" transition from school to college. In the words of a student (M, Com, LCU), "College is college, whether you study in Sikkim or go out." The next chapter, thus, by taking a cohort of college students, attempts to understand the experiences and aspirations of those who stay back and access higher education in a rural college in Sikkim.

CHAPTER FIVE

Experiences and Aspirations of College Youth

The establishment of a central university in 2007 and opening of colleges, both government and private, in various parts of Sikkim, increased access to higher education. The changing higher educational background made the local degree college in Rhenock an interesting space to understand how increasing access to higher education in rural areas influenced the educational aspirations of the students at the margins. In the previous chapter, the school, GSR, as a site of study, was seen to be significant in shaping certain kinds of aspirations in the young people. Similarly, in this chapter we shall focus on the local college, Government College Rhenock (GCR) or the College. One of the main objectives of this chapter is to illustrate how new educational spaces in rural areas were shaping the perceptions and aspirations of the students, especially with respect to education and work.

As in the previous chapter, we first look at the educational aspirations and choices of the college students. Then the rest of the chapter will thematically look at the various influences on the aspirations and further educational decisions of these students. We argue that the institutional context of the College, their families, societal perceptions, and the dominant discourses about employment, all intersect with each other and influence how the students chart out their future pathways. With their entry into higher education creating new possibilities and hopes, this chapter tries to understand how the students' attempt to align their lived "realities" with these aspirations.

This chapter primarily draws from the 2011 survey and in-depth interviews with final (3rd) year students at GCR. Teacher interviews, focus group discussions with students in junior batches, participant observation, and informal conversations have also been brought in to enrich the understanding of various themes that have emerged. The codes used to describe the participants are the same as that employed in Chapter Four. However, the subjects taught by the faculty members at GCR have been avoided while describing them to ensure confidentiality of the teacher participants.

Educational and Occupational Aspirations of the College Students

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the survey questionnaire was returned by 30 students out of the 32 enrolled students in their final year of college in 2011. Out of the 30 students, 18 were from Rhenock and the nearby areas, 9 were from other places within Sikkim, and 3 were from the bordering villages in West Bengal.

The continuity between the school and college chosen for the study can be seen in the student composition. Many students coming into the College was from the senior secondary school in Rhenock and from the nearby areas. Sixteen (out of the 30) college students had come from GSR. As already shown in Chapter Three, majority of the students came from government schools and were from the lower social class with parents' occupation largely being small farmers, lower-level government employees, agricultural workers, petty business persons and manual workers. Only three students had parents working as school teachers.

The college students' high aspirations for further studies mirrored the trend seen among the school students in the previous chapter. Majority of them, both male and female, wanted to study till the post-graduation level, while only 3 students hoped to complete till the undergraduate level.

Among the 30 students, majority (18 out of 30) wanted to apply for post-graduation or masters at Sikkim University, while the rest were also considering going outside the state to study further.

Table 5.1

College Students' Educational Aspirations

Highest Level of Education Aspired	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Undergraduate (UG)	1	14	2	9	3	10
Postgraduate (PG)	2	29	10	43	12	40
Beyond PG	4	57	11	48	15	50
Others (B.Ed./Diplomas)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	7	100	23	100	30	100

Looking at their occupational aspirations, although the students were concerned about the limited job opportunities available to them, most of them were looking at the public sector for employment. Just like the school students, the college students were largely looking at white collar occupations in the future. More than half (17 out of 30) wanted to become teachers. The rest mentioned police officer (2), politician (2), lawyer (1), business (1), fashion designer (1), cricketer (1) as their future job aspirations, while 5 students gave no response.

Influences on Choices and Aspirations

The College. The College or GCR can be perceived as playing an important role in shaping the future trajectories of students coming from families with very low levels of participation in higher education. By providing access to higher education, it gave a platform to young people from rural areas to engage with the idea of higher studies and associated employment options. This section will look at the complex way the College influenced student aspirations and choices.

GCR as a higher educational destination. At the time of the study, the College was facing issues with student enrolment and student retention. As per the College records, in the 2009-10 academic session, comparing the total number of students enrolled (62, 26 males and 36 females) with the total number of students (31, 8 males and 23 females) appearing for the final year exams, 31 students (18 males and 13 females) or 50 per cent (69 per cent males, 36 per cent females) had dropped out. Similarly, in the next batch (2010-11), out of 84 students (30 males and 54 females) who initially enrolled only 57 (14 males and 43 females) appeared for their final examination in 2013, thereby showing the total number of dropouts as 27 (16 males and 11 females). The drop-out rate for the above batch was 32 per cent (53 per cent for males and 20 percent for females). Majority of those who left GCR, did so out in the first year. 27 students (enrolled in 2009-10) and 21 students (enrolled in 2010-11) had dropped out in the first year of college (GCR office records). In both batches the male drop-out rate was much higher than the female drop-out rate.

There were several reasons for the high drop-out rates at GCR. The College was often seen as a fallback option by students. They would get themselves enrolled at GCR and stay till a better opportunity, like an admission to a college outside Rhenock or even a stable job, came through. Failing exams was another reason for students dropping out. Few of them also left due to various personal circumstances.

Being a newly established institution, with no campus of its own, GCR was not perceived by majority of the school pass outs as a viable option for higher studies inside Sikkim. They preferred the more prominent degree college in the capital town of Gangtok. After Gangtok, the next choice was the government college in Namchi, a town in South Sikkim that had rapidly urbanized from the mid 1990s onwards. Besides their urban location, the colleges in Gangtok and Namchi also had proper campuses, better facilities, and offered more course and subject options than GCR. Likewise, for many of the student participants, GCR had been the “last option.” They had applied to the degree college in Gangtok (and other places) and settled for GCR only after failing to get admission in those colleges.

Within the dominant "metrocentric" (Campbell and Yates, 2011) discourses, villages and remote towns are perceived as places to be left behind if something worthwhile – economic security and high status – is to be achieved in your life (Corbett, 2007). This "metrocentric" discourse, in a way, affected the aspirations of young people in Rhenock. On being asked about the preference among students for colleges outside Rhenock, a college student (M, 3rd year, LCU) replied, "I think it's because we have studied in a *basti* (village) all of our lives. So, for college everyone wants to go out."

Although GCR was not a highly desired educational destination, it provided a space for students who lacked the resources to go to urban areas to study. The College also had certain policies aimed at increasing student enrolment. For instance, GCR had no cut-off marks for admission. It also admitted students from vocational and commerce streams to the B.A. degree courses without any other requirements besides a school completion certificate. The open-door admission policy made GCR accessible to those who were not able to secure college admission elsewhere. So, the College attracted students not just from Rhenock but also various parts of Sikkim and neighboring areas of West Bengal. Occasionally, there would be students from more distant places in the north-eastern states of India, and even from the neighboring countries of Bhutan and Nepal.

GCR was a low-cost option for students from families with marginal incomes, especially for those living in Rhenock or those who had relatives living there. For Sonia (F, 3rd year, LCL), GCR was her "best option." She was from a remote bordering village in West Bengal. Her parents were agricultural workers and she lived with her relatives in Rhenock while attending college. In one of the focus group interviews, Pema (M, 2nd year, LCU) stated:

> Many parents cannot afford to send their children out. In some families, the children have to take care of responsibilities at home. In my case, after my mother passed away, my father was alone here. I had to stay back. If we have colleges only in urban areas, then we will have to choose between studying outside or helping at home.

For those from Rhenock and the surrounding area, the proximity to home was an important factor particularly for parents of female students to consider GCR (also see Chapter Four). The average female enrolment at GCR was at 57 per cent from 2009 to 2012 (Table 3.2). As discussed, the retention of female students in the College was also much higher than that of the male students. Other factors like low marks in school leaving examinations, gender constraints, health issues, and other personal problems were quoted by students for choosing GCR.

Ironically, contrary to the dominant "metrocentric" discourse, for few students, the rural location of the College was an advantage. In some of the interviews, the students seemed to perceive urban colleges to be places where there were too many distractions and spoke about how students there could get "easily spoiled." GCR, with its quiet surroundings, was seen as a conducive learning environment.

The establishment of the first central university, Sikkim University, and the subsequent affiliation of all the state government colleges became another motivating factor to consider colleges like GCR, despite its location and poor infrastructure. Dechen (F, 3rd year, LCU) was from a village near Rhenock and had passed out from GCR. Her elder brother worked in the state government as a lower-level administrative staff and her parents were both farmers. According to her, "I, along with few of my friends, was initially considering joining a college in Kalimpong (West Bengal). However, when Sikkim University came, my family told me that we should study in a college inside Sikkim as we are from Sikkim, and we will also get a degree from a central university." Thus, with the Sikkim University in place, families in rural areas were shifting their children's higher educational destinations inside Sikkim rather than going for what was seen as affordable institutions in the neighboring state of West Bengal, as was the trend earlier, especially in the border towns like Rhenock. The College can, thus, be seen as an inclusive space for those students who found themselves at the margins of the educational system.

Being in the College. The College being housed in three rental buildings by the roadside made for a unique sight. During working hours, the quiet locality came alive with students and teachers going about their business. The college environment was contiguous with the village life surrounding it. The locals would often stop by and chat with the college staff and students. It was quite common to see local farmers stopping by to sell vegetables and other fresh produce to the college staff. Classroom teaching was frequently interrupted by army trucks and heavy vehicles passing through. It was a routine response for the teachers to pause, let the noise subside, before going back to their teaching. During breaks from class, students sat by the roadside in small groups, talking and laughing, as the cars went by. There were also two small shacks, a few meters away from the College, which sold tea and snacks. Both were run by women who lived in the locality surrounding the College. They operated as the college canteen – another place for the students (and teachers) to spend time in between classes.

The college buildings were surrounded by a thicket of bamboo trees at the back. The locals derisively called GCR the *baas ghari* (bamboo grove) college. The satire in referring to

the College as the *baas ghari* college was directed at the poor infrastructure and, thereby, the perceived, "low" quality of education in GCR. Early on, during my fieldwork, one of the college students told me, "You know we are known as the *baas ghari* college. People make fun of us. They think that we are not doing anything serious in here. That is how they see us."

The poor infrastructure of the College was often spoken about by the students. They complained about not having a proper campus of their own. The female students spoke about the dismal state of the toilets in the College due to irregular water supply and poor maintenance. Teachers and students complained about the erratic power supply which made it difficult to teach in some classrooms. During the rainy season, many of the classrooms below the road level would get dark and musty.

Due to lack of funds, the college administration had to adopt austere measures. This meant that besides the daily functioning, the College did not have the resources for other activities and events. The college curriculum was focused largely on classroom teaching. The routine consisted of eight hours of scheduled classes starting from 9 AM in the morning till 5 PM in the evening. A single student often had to sit for five to six hours of classes spread throughout the day. Students complained about being overburdened, with many of them bunking the classes scheduled later in the day. The persistent complaint from the students in the College was that there were rarely any extra-curricular activities. They felt that fieldtrips, tours, sports, and cultural events should have been encouraged. In their view, the heavy focus on classes often led to boredom and lack of motivation. Karma (M, 2nd year, LCU) in a focus group interview, seemed exasperated:

> There must be a good environment to study. The surroundings should be good. Here, you look around, and it's all so depressing. You feel like giving up. For me college was about enjoying life but then I came here and realized that we must work hard. But to work hard, we need some enjoyment also and here, there is nothing. Although the studies are good here, I think I have become more careless now.

Students emphasized their concept of a good college environment. Students like Karma desired a more vibrant college life filled with different kinds of activities. The College with its limited resources was unable to meet their expectations of an ideal college life. The long teaching hours led to monotony and boredom among students. In response, students compensated for the lack of recreation by organizing cultural programs and events during "Teachers' Day" or "Children's Day" in the College. They also organized "Freshers' Day" for the newcomers and farewell programs for the final year students. They would raise money from all the students and ask the principal and the faculty members to contribute too. They

would even prepare the food to be served in these events themselves. Such events were lively with singing and dancing and provided the much-needed respite to the students. However, these programs would often drag on for hours. As it appears, the students wanted to hang on to them for as long as they could.

What was striking about the environment in the College was the camaraderie between the teachers and the students. In terms of age, majority of the faculty members were young, in their mid-twenties to their early thirties. The interaction between students and teachers were often informal and friendly. With low student enrolment in GCR, the classes were not crowded, making it possible for the teachers to give individual attention to the students. The teachers were familiar with most of the students and there was a strong sense of community within the College. The students appreciated this. Student interviews revealed their positive view of teachers:

> If you look at this college, there is nothing. We don't have our own campus and even the environment is not that good, but I feel happy about just one thing and that is the teachers here give us a lot of encouragement. In everything they tell us that we can do it. (Bishal, M, 3rd year, LCU)
>
> In Gangtok, they have a good college, but it is not like that here. Here we keep interacting with the teachers. We can go up to them and meet them any time. In Gangtok, the teachers don't even know the students. (Pema, M, 2nd year, LCU)

Many of the teachers were themselves from rural areas. This made them empathize with the various problems the students faced. Although there were occasional conflicts between the students and the teachers, they were often resolved quickly. The teachers in GCR played a major role in the way the students reoriented their relationship towards education and their further educational goals.

The students also looked at the College as a platform to improve their skills and abilities. Aware of their shortcomings (see later section on student self-perceptions), the students, in a way, saw GCR as a space which could help them come out of their "backwardness." As a student (M, 2nd year, LMC) pointed out in one of the focus group interviews, "Colleges like ours are very important because we cannot compete with those outside immediately after school."

Teacher perceptions and practices in a changing higher educational backdrop. As discussed, the College catered to students from government schools, students who were unable to get admission elsewhere due to their low academic performance in school. The faculty members at GCR spoke at length about the low academic skills of the students. They

felt that students were weak in English, leading to their inability to write, read and speak well. They also felt that students' knowledge of even the major topics covered in school was missing. "We have to give them an idea about everything. It's like they have heard the topics for the first time," a faculty member (M, senior college teacher) remarked. With the students coming in with very low stocks of foundational knowledge and general awareness, the teachers in GCR said they were faced with quite a huge task of teaching the college-level curriculum.

The College was also affected by the larger developments taking place within the higher educational sector within the state. The establishment of Sikkim University with its aim to provide "quality" higher education reshaped the college practices to a great extent. The courses were redesigned, and the syllabi updated with new topics. Semester system replaced the older annual one. Teacher autonomy in student evaluation was emphasized. Writing of term papers and presentations were made mandatory for every course. New rules to encourage high college attendance of the students were put in place.[89] The teachers at GCR were trying to keep pace with the requirements that came with these policies. The teachers who had taught the earlier curriculum prescribed by the North Bengal University (NBU) were finding it difficult to incorporate some of the changes. One of the older faculty members, Ms. Binita (F) remarked, "Earlier (under NBU), we used to see the students only a few times in a year. They would come, collect notes from us and then we see them only during the examinations. They came to college only to do their paperwork in the college office and that was it." That had radically changed with the new system where regular attendance had been made mandatory.

Teachers frequently complained about the quality of the term papers and assignments submitted by majority of the students. One of the teachers, Ms. Renu (F, college teacher) stated, "They just copy and paste from the internet and submit. Some of them are not even aware of what they are copying." In the staffroom, the teachers would share what their students had written, with exasperation and, sometimes, amusement. Some of them seemed troubled by the low academic capability of their students. "I often feel as though we are fighting a losing battle. We have all these things – term papers, presentations and all – and the students are not able to comprehend what is it that they actually have to do," remarked Mr. Dorjee (M, college teacher) with a sigh. The teachers also pointed out that the students did not understand their lectures, especially if delivered only in English. Most teachers said that they

[89] The students were required to attend a minimum of 75 per cent of the classes, failing which they were barred from the end semester examinations. In every course, 5 per cent of the marks were kept aside for those students who surpassed the minimum attendance of 75 per cent of the classes.

used both Nepali and English to communicate in class. Many gave pre-prepared notes on various topics and asked students to memorize those for the examinations.

Evaluation of students was a very sensitive issue in GCR. Students would often pass quite easily with high marks allotted to them by their course teachers in the internal evaluation itself. Although many teachers perceived overall student performance to be quite low, most were generous in their evaluation. This was partly due to teachers wanting to save themselves from various repercussions. In every course, students' marks were closely tied to the competency of the teacher. With over three fourths of the total number of teachers employed on contractual basis (see Chapter Three), teachers were under scrutiny. "Here, if a student fails, instead of the student, the teacher is questioned. The general thinking among the teachers is that it is better to just give pass marks and avoid the entire headache," confided Ms. Shikha (F, college teacher). A young teacher, Mr. Subash (M, college teacher), exclaimed, "Everyone passes! Even the weak students are passing out of this college."

Similarly, even with student attendance, the teachers and the college administration adopted leniency as an unwritten rule. Barring a student with low attendance from the end semester examination brought forth a tedious series of paperwork for the teacher concerned. The student in question would come and present an array of reasons, medical certificates, and letters from their guardians. In most cases, the teachers had to accommodate the students eventually. The common practice, thus, was to often give all the students in one's class the minimum attendance regardless of their actual presence or absence in class.

A few of the students were unhappy about what they saw as laxity in college practices. They felt it was demotivating to those students who invested a lot of effort in their work and detrimental to students in general. One of them, Ajay (M, 3rd year, LCU), said that such practices encouraged the students not to work hard:

> I think the college should take the term papers and presentations more strictly. We easily get 16 or 17 or 18 (marks) out of 25. After that, students think that they will easily get through and then they do not study.

Another student, Dechen (F, 3rd year, LCU), talked about the students getting away with not attending classes:

> Just because it is college, students should not be given too much freedom. What the students in this college do is that they do not come for classes and in the end get fake medical certificates and the teachers just sign on them. They can do it for genuine cases, but they do not even check properly. This is how students get spoiled.

On the contrary, the lax evaluation and leniency towards students in the College cultivated confidence in some. Lendup (M, 3rd year, LMC) felt that he was not a well-performing student while in school and spoke about how that changed for him after joining GCR. Lendup wanted to pursue further studies after his college and seemed quite motivated to do so:

> Till class XII, I used to think that I was a very weak student. After coming here, I still did not study much. I just listened to what the teachers said in class and wrote that for my exams. And I got through, I passed. Looking at that, I feel that if you are getting through by just listening to the teachers and writing just that, then if you go home and actually study, you can do much better than that.

Taking Lendup as a case of a typical GCR student, we can plot the educational trajectory of students who came to study there. The College admitted students who had been low academic performers in school (low marks in the final school examination was one of the most cited reasons for coming to GCR). At GCR, a newly established institution, a combination of factors such as poor infrastructure, lack of resources, insecure employed status of teachers, a high teacher-student ratio, and an ambitious curriculum (floated by a new university) resulted in certain college practices. The College was in the process of creating an image of providing quality higher education and teachers were under pressure to show the same through the performance of students. In addition, the institution's lack of resources made it difficult to align the low academic competency of students with the demanding curriculum imposed from above. Teachers had to make the curriculum comprehensible and approachable for the students. With minimal expectations, teachers continued with methods of teaching that suited the students, such as rote learning or using Nepali as a medium of instruction. This was also accompanied by lax assessment of students. These practices contributed to the renewing of students' confidence in their own academic capabilities, as in Lendup's case. The high educational aspirations of students in GCR, thus, can be seen within this context of encouragement and reassurance that the College was able to provide to the students.

Another factor that encouraged students to pursue further studies after college were developments that were taking place with the establishment of Sikkim University. First, the new university itself emerged as an accessible, cost-effective educational destination for post-college studies for students in and around Sikkim. During its first few years of establishment, the university officials and faculty members would visit the colleges all over Sikkim, including GCR, and orient and counsel the students about the courses offered by the

university and the future scope of studying these courses. Second, the new university emphasized knowledge production within the state and the urgent need for research by local scholars. This was reflected in some student interviews as well. Kavya (F, 3rd year, LMC) wanted to pursue a Ph.D. since, according to her, "The books on Sikkim that we are studying right now are all written by authors who are from outside. People from Sikkim have not written any good books and that is the reason why I want to do research." Kavya's account mirrored those of the university officials during the counselling sessions organized in GCR. Finally, some of the newly recruited faculty members (in 2011) were themselves pursuing their higher educational degrees at Sikkim University. Having completed their masters, few of them were enrolled as research scholars at SU. Also, majority of the other teachers were fresh out of universities outside and some of them were simultaneously pursuing their M.Phil. and Ph.D. degrees, either at SU or outside the state. This created an environment where the teachers would talk about their own research pursuits and mentor the students towards the same direction. Few teachers would also help the students to prepare for the post-graduate entrance examinations and help with the process of applying for various courses in SU, and outside Sikkim. The university and the College, thus, played an important role in familiarizing the students to the higher educational landscape and the possibilities it offered. This was likely to have contributed to furthering educational aspirations of students at GCR.

Being "educated" and being "too educated": Student perceptions of education. To understand the educational aspirations of the students, it is important to contextualize this same within their larger perceptions about education and being an "educated person" (Levinson and Holland., 1996) or simply *being educated*. In many ways, the college students' high educational aspirations aligned with their attitudes towards education. In other words, their attitude towards education and being educated was overwhelmingly positive. Similar to the findings of Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki's (2014) study of Tanzanian girls, the students at GCR emphasized both the "instrumental" and "intrinsic" values of education in their narratives. At an individual level, students saw education as something that would greatly benefit them in the long run. Many said that education was an important route to improving one's living standards. They all believed that being educated was something that garnered respect from others in society. A few of them also said that education made an individual more resourceful and self-reliant, thereby making one less vulnerable to uncertainties in life. Lendup (M, 3rd year, LMC) stated:

> I think that without education there is nothing else. The thinking of those who are educated and those who aren't do not match. If you have education, you have

everything. You get respect, your personality becomes good and even your living standard improves. After you get educated, it is not important that you must have a job. If you are educated, then you can make a living anyhow.

At a more social level, education for the students was deeply attached to a sense of responsibility to one's place of origin. Just like school students in the previous chapter, college students believed that being educated was a means to bring about change in their respective villages and localities. Jivan's (M, 3rd year, LCU) parents were small farmers and from a village inhabited mostly by his kin and caste members. Belonging to a middle caste, he felt that his neighboring village (which was occupied by upper caste Bahuns) was more "developed". People in the neighboring village were more educated and mostly employed at the higher-level government service. Compared to them, in Jivan's own village, his generation was the first to go to school. He talked about how the neighboring villagers had used their positions to bring in various projects and now that he and his peers were also educated, they wished to do the same in their village:

> I think it is education that has made all the difference. The people in the neighboring village have been educated for a while now and they know what to do and how to get development into their village. They don't have to do lower-level work. In our village, our parents knew nothing. They were satisfied with the way things were, just looking after their fields. I am glad that at least our parents educated us since we can now understand a lot of things better. Today, in our village too, there are a few of us who are educated, and some have even finished college. So, we come together and talk about what we can do to improve our village in the future.

The above narrative emphasizes the importance of education and government employment in raising the status of not just individuals but also that of the entire village community. This notion that was present in the students' accounts where many of them felt that the villages they came from needed change and being educated was going to contribute to that change in some manner in the future is extremely significant.

The importance of education was also contextualized in terms of gender benefits and roles. For the female students, education brought about gender equality by changing the role of women in society and perceptions about gender. Kavya, mentioned earlier, highlighted the qualities of an "educated person" and how such a person thinks about society and gender:

> The mentality of an educated person is different. If you are educated, then you think about the welfare of the entire society. Educated people try to bring about good

changes in society. In rural areas, they often differentiate between girls and boys. Educated people, however, don't think like that.

Although the female students strongly felt the importance of education for their future, with the promises of financial independence and how others would perceive them, there were also some apprehensions about the dominant socio-cultural notions about educated women. Dechen (F, 3rd year, LCU), mentioned earlier, was first-generation to go to school. She stated:

> In our community, we are told from childhood that we are women and after getting married, we need to know how to take care of our families and our homes. We have been taught household chores from a very young age.

Although Dechen told me that she wanted to study till the Ph.D. level, she was also worried about other people's perceptions of women being "too educated." In her words, "I want to study as much as I can but, in our society, when women are too educated, people don't talk well about them. We, being women, also have to think about all of that."

Education by itself was not enough, according to the students. For educated persons to be valued in the close-knit, communitarian, village communities they had to be embedded within the local milieu and be able to help the people around. Educated persons needed to stay connected and be able to communicate with those around. In one of the focus group interviews, amidst much laughter from other students, Navin (M, 2nd year, LCU) gave an example of someone from his village who could not "even talk properly" with his fellow villagers:

> Education is important but that is not all. In our village, there is this man who has done his masters in English. Despite being educated, he does not know how to even talk properly. When the villagers see him, they say, "Look! The *pagla* (madman) is coming!" So, I think only education is not important. You also need to come forward and do something for the society.

Despite the overall affirmation of education by the students, there seemed to be a certain mismatch between the larger socio-cultural expectations and getting a good education. For young women, it also had to be kept in mind that being "too educated" might not bring about a positive response from the others. For all students, participation in important village activities was sometimes considered more important than their regular attendance in school or college. The teachers at GCR often grumbled about how a student, sometimes, even an entire group of students, would stay absent from college for days at a stretch because they had gone to help with either a marriage or a funeral in their locality. Modern education brought with it the risk of being more "individualistic" and "distant" from the rural lives the students

belonged to. Coming from a social context where collectivism was emphasized and social relationships were characterized by reciprocity and obligations, the students were aware that they had to balance education (or being "educated") with societal expectations. Navin articulated it above, for the students, to remain socially relevant and useful was very important. Educational aspirations, thus, was contingent on how the students fitted their educational goals and experiences within the social world inhabited by them. Contradictions between the requirements of education and of the larger society needed to be worked out and balanced. This could mean that, like in the case of Dechen, despite wanting to acquire higher level educational qualifications, they needed to curtail their educational aspirations in order to conform to societal norms.

Schooling histories, self-perceptions, and academic abilities. Although students had some level of confidence in their overall capabilities, they were very much aware of their academic "shortcomings." Their proficiency in English language skills, or rather the lack of it, was the biggest problem for most of them:

> I really think that English education is important. Since my base in English is not good, I really feel I did not study better because of that. If your English is good, then you can do well in every field, in every subject. I really regret not getting a good English education. (Sonia, 3rd year student, female, lower-lower class)

The deficiency in basic skills was often traced to their government schooling background. All student participants had come from government schools with more than three-fourths having attended government schools only (see Table 3.3 in Chapter Three). Majority of the students expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of education offered in government schools. Pooja (F, 3rd year, LCU) spoke strongly about the school teachers whom she felt was the problem with government school education:

> In primary level, we still have teachers who are not well-qualified. These kinds of teachers should be made to retire, and their jobs given to new candidates. The old teachers are teaching the same old thing again and again. New teachers will bring in new and interesting things.

Private schools were viewed as better than government schools in equipping pupils with stronger foundational skills. Ajay (M, 3rd year, LCU) felt that the private school students have "better English", were "more creative" in "painting", "writing" and "everything."

Parental involvement in their children's education was seen by the students to be greater in the case of private school students.[90] According to Kavya (F, 3rd year, LMC):

> What happens in government schools is that parents send them to school but at home they leave them free. They don't give too much importance to their studies. In private schools, after the children come back from school, they are made to work hard at home too. If parents of government school students give as much importance to their children's studies like the parents who send their children to private schools, then government school students are going to be even smarter than the private school students.

Kavya had studied in government schools since the primary level. She lived in a joint family with her married brothers. Her parents had been small farmers, but her father had passed away when she was very young. Her brothers worked in lower-level government jobs and provided for the family. When asked if her own family would have been more attentive to her studies if she had attended a private school, she replied, "We did not have any educated person in our family. My older brothers were still studying. So, even if they had put me in a private school then there would have been no one to help me."

On deeper reflection, the student participants were aware that the type of schooling also had to be accompanied by a specific kind of support from their families. The difference between private and government schooling, thus, went beyond the institutional aspect. Parent's educational level and the level of cultural capital offered at home were seen as important factors in equipping the students with the requisite skills and confidence to do well in academics.

Overall, the students' narratives about their schooling experiences revealed lack of guidance and direction. Dechen (F, 3rd year, LCU) offers a comprehensive account of government schooling from a student's perspective. Her junior school days were about rote learning and academic engagement borne out of fear of teachers, of guardians, and of punishment. As for senior schooling, she was without much supervision or guidance. Coming from a remote village, students like Dechen had to stay away from home to attend senior level schooling. According to her:

> In primary school, since it was close to home, our older siblings used to take us to school and bring us back. In the school, they used to make us memorize everything. The school was strict, so we used to study out of fear. In junior classes, my brothers

[90] Similar narrative was shared by the GSR students and parents in Chapter Four.

> used to tell us to study hard. When they mentioned school, we used to be very scared. Then came secondary school and we were freer because we stayed in rented rooms, away from home. My brothers guided me but not so much like before. We had to study on our own. In senior secondary, we did not study much. We just roamed around. It was only during exams that we would realize that we should have studied more. The school also was not too strict. There were too many students in the class and since we stayed away from home, parents and guardians were not there to guide us. Because of this, I think we did not study much and did not give much interest to studies.

Being first generation school goers or having parents with low educational levels, the students found it difficult to get help with their schoolwork especially in the senior levels of schooling. This had been the case for most of the students, whether like Dechen, they attended schools away from home, or like Kavya, they had stayed back.

The shortcomings of government schooling and low parental involvement was accentuated by their rural location. Students often compared themselves with "students from outside" – those from urban areas or from outside Sikkim – often considering themselves "backward" and "not good enough". Bishal (M, 3rd year, LCU) stated:

> When you look at other students, especially those from other states, we are backward. Right now, so many students in our college don't know how to even turn a computer on. There are many things we don't know. We just know how to study and even that we don't do it well. Our parents have not studied much, so if they have a son in college, they think that their son is studying so much, that he is educated. In reality, their son or daughter has not received much knowledge. They are not good enough.

What is significant is that students were aware of their limitations and had the desire to improve themselves. They were, in a way, trying to make up for years of falling behind. The question that remained was whether they would be able to "catch up."

Studying further: The role of the family. Being a rural college, GCR largely catered to students from the lower social classes (see Table 3.4). Almost three-fourths of the college students belonged to families where parents were largely small farmers or agricultural workers. The few who came from rural lower-middle classes had parents/guardians who were working as school teachers or had lower-level government jobs or small businesses. In this category, majority of students were females. Compared to the school students, the college students had parents with lower educational levels (see Table 3.5 and 3.6). Three-fourths of

the fathers and mothers had studied only till the primary level. Except for one student, the rest were all first generation to access higher education.

Most students ideally wanted to study more, in terms of their post-college plans. However, students can be divided broadly into two groups – those who needed to secure employment and those who planned to study further. In the latter group were those who wanted to pursue post-graduate studies and those who wanted to do a B.Ed. degree, teaching being the most preferred occupational aspiration.

The aspiration to study further was driven by the interplay of various factors within the family. As in the case of school students, financial considerations, parental support, role of siblings, and family's social networks were important for GCR students in charting out their future pathways. Also, students from Sikkim were more likely to continue with their studies due to their easier access to Sikkim University and a lower cost of living and studying inside the state, particularly for those with relatives in the capital town of Gangtok. For students who were from a similar class background but were from the neighboring villages of West Bengal, it was more difficult to continue studying inside Sikkim as they had scantier family networks inside the state. It was also more difficult for them to access further studies outside the state, especially if, along with financial constraints, they were low academic performers too.

In-depth analysis of individual cases revealed an interplay of different types of support mechanisms or constraints within family that either made it possible for students to continue studying or stop. Both Lendup (M, 3rd year, LMC) and Ravi (M, 3rd year, LCU) wanted to continue with their further studies. Lendup would have dropped out after school as it was quite common for boys in his native village to leave school and start work in the fields. His father, a primary school teacher, was quite instrumental in Lendup's decision to study further:

> What happens in our village is that a lot of students, especially boys, drop out of school. We work here and there and that's how it is. We usually work in the fields. The village people give you food and pay you in kind. Some of them also join NREGA. After school was over, I was free and even I started doing the same. Then my father asked me what I will do with just a school-pass certificate. He insisted that I join this college. Now I realize that he was right and staying in the village was not going to get me anywhere. I will continue my studies as long as my father can support me and as long as I am able to study.

In Lendup's case, although the social milieu to which he belonged was not conducive for the formation of high aspirations for education, his father's support and timely advice got him out of his village and into a higher educational institution. For Ravi, the situation was

slightly different. His parents were small farmers and wanted him to start working early. Ravi had two brothers, both of whom were employed. One was in the army and the other in the private sector. Ravi was going to be the only one in the family to have competed a college degree. Ravi was keen on doing his masters from SU and his parents had finally given in to the decision. “For my parents, graduation is enough and after graduation they say that I should start working. But I have told them that I want to study further, and now they are okay with it.”

Unlike Lendup’s father, Ravi’s parents were not as insistent on higher education. The pressure to get a job, however, was not too strong on Ravi because his two older siblings were earning already. The point is that, despite belonging to a lower social class compared to Lendup, Ravi was able to pursue further studies. The constraints posed by social class category (contingent on parents’ occupation, income, and educational level) was, thus, accentuated or reduced by other factors, for example an earning sibling. In Ravi’s case, additional income from his employed siblings and his own motivation to study further made his parents willing to wait for Ravi to get a job. Kavya’s (F, 3rd year, LMC) case was like Ravi’s. As we have mentioned earlier, Kavya wanted to pursue a career in academics. After her father passed away, her three brothers (all of whom were securely employed with stable incomes) provided for the family. According to Kavya, her family was very keen on her pursuing higher education since none of her older siblings had been able to do so. In both Ravi’s and in Kavya’s case, there is a desire in their families to have at least one child who is highly educated. This becomes possible when the family has a steady source of income, either that of the parents or of older siblings.

However, some students did not have family situations conducive to pursuing education after college. Families with unstable incomes or aging parents or no additional sources of income often could not wait too long. There was, hence, a pressing need for some of the students to get employed. Sonia (F, 3rd year, LCL), as mentioned earlier, was from West Bengal. Her parents were agricultural workers, and she had a younger brother who was still in school. Her elder sister was married, so Kavya being the middle sibling had to think about getting a job soon and was likely to drop out:

> I want to study at least till my masters. I think I will do it from a distance course because right now, it is very important for me to get a job. With my eldest sister married, my parents expect a lot from me. For them, it is necessary for me to start working. They have told me that after I get a job, I can do other things that I want to.

Sonia faced dual disadvantages when it came to the fulfilment of her further educational plans. Her parents were depending upon her to help support the family financially. To add to that, since her family was not from Sikkim, it was more difficult for Sonia to convince her parents to let her continue staying on in Sikkim (where with the new university, access to post-graduate courses had suddenly opened up) and pursue her studies till a job opening comes up. As demonstrated by earlier cases, financial constraint was the one of the most important factors that decided the further educational trajectory of the students. The importance of financial support was captured by Lokesh (M, 2nd year, LCU), who pointedly remarked in a focus group interview:

> Okay, I want to study, but how long can your parents educate you? If there is no one else in the house who is working, how much can they support with one person's earning? So, it is difficult to say that I want to study more.

In sum, while the students, all of whom were from the lower social classes, wanted to go for higher studies after college, the realization of their aspiration want finally depended on the collective financial resources of their families and how much could be set aside for that purpose. With college level education perceived as being "enough," many of their parents wanted them to start looking for employment opportunities. Some families could wait a bit longer, and there were others who could not. As we shall discuss next, the opportunity structure added yet another dimension to this complexity of deciding what to do after college for the students.

The opportunity structure: Perceptions, preferences, and anxieties. Students were acutely aware of the dwindling job opportunities in Sikkim. With the widening of access to higher education within the state, the mass enrolment of students into higher education added to their apprehensions. Dechen (F, 3rd year, LCU) worried both about the increasing enrolment of students in higher educational institutions and how that would lead to a high level of competition for jobs later:

> I worry if I will get a job or not. There are so many who are studying and getting educated. For instance, for the B.Ed. college, there are 450 applicants and only 30 seats. For the post of a revenue surveyor in the state government, there were almost 40,000 applicants. It is going to be very difficult for us.

A credential inflation could be seen in Sikkim. Aspiration for most was largely to secure government jobs inside the state. With the growing scarcity of permanent government posts being advertised, the graduates (even those who were highly qualified) applied for most government posts that were advertised. This was largely to occupy a government post till a

position that suited one's interest or qualification became available. When Dechen mentions the example of the post of revenue surveyor she points to the same. Even the college teachers were constantly attempting to upgrade their job. At the time of the fieldwork, many ad hoc faculty members were appearing for examinations and interviews for various posts such as graduate schoolteachers, post-graduate teachers, and other administrative jobs. In the case of the state civil services exams, even permanent teachers would apply. As one teacher joked, for some jobs, they would find themselves sitting together with their final year students in the same examination hall. Students, thus, were wary of the competition they had to face to secure permanent government employment.

Students at GCR, with their degree in arts and an uneven academic performance, the government jobs they were looking mainly at was teaching and middle to lower-level administration. None of the students mentioned the state civil services, which was highly competitive and the most desired option for those from the arts stream in Sikkim. More than half of the students wanted to go for teaching. In their narratives, they espoused the popular discourses of teachers as "nation builders", "knowledge providers", "respected by society", and so on. Teaching was a pragmatic choice for the students in a variety of ways. First, there were various levels of teaching, from primary school to college level teaching. Depending on one's qualifications, aptitude, and interest, it offered students a variety of options. In rural areas, a typical teacher's role as a social worker or a counsellor usually extended beyond the school walls. This appealed to the students as it blended with the ethos of the village community life. Teaching was also perceived as a less demanding profession allowing the individuals time to meet their familial and social obligations. Quite importantly, teachers in the rural areas were pertinent symbols of upward social mobility. Many of the newly constructed buildings, vehicles, and other consumer goods were owned by the local school teachers. Such demonstrations of consumption were undoubtedly something that attracted the young people. Teaching, unlike other government posts, had high levels of recruitment, especially in the ad hoc or contractual capacity. "The students want to go into teaching because in Sikkim there are a lot of teachers and they assume it is easier to get the job," ironically remarked Ms. Laden (F, college teacher).

Some of the male saw participation in politics as a good fallback option if nothing else works. It was viewed as an important strategy for quicker upward mobility as it equipped one with "networks" and "connections" that were "needed" to make a good living and to gain viable employment. While some students supported the meritocratic discourse, many felt that such discourses were illusory. They alleged that to get anything done in Sikkim, you needed a

certain kind of social capital that the upper sections of the society possessed. And if one did not belong to the privileged social classes, then participation in the political sphere was an effective means to acquire the requisite social capital. In Bishal's (M, 3rd year, male, LCU) words,

> The more I think about it, the more I want to join politics. If you know the political leaders, even if they don't help you financially, they can help you get some job or the other. Even if you cannot become a leader then at least you will get to know people. In Sikkim, it doesn't matter whether you are very educated or have talent. You cannot be anything if you do not have the support of the politicians.

The disillusionment of students with the status quo was seen among teachers as well. Some of them felt that the young people's perceptions about the employment scenario, especially inside Sikkim, were leading them to develop strategies that disregarded merit and hard work and politics was being viewed as an easy option:

> The trend in Sikkim is that the educated, unemployed youth are increasingly joining politics in order to get jobs and other opportunities. Working hard in their studies and facing the competition is something that they do not want to do. They don't have belief in themselves, and they don't have belief in the system. (Mr. Kumar, M, college teacher)

The opening up of access to higher education and various other skill development schemes initiated by the state government, which apparently gave the youth "everything on a platter", seen as appeasement policies aimed at young voters, was another factor mentioned by Ms. Deepika (F, college teacher)

> The youth in Sikkim are getting very impatient. They want everything without having to work hard. Sometimes I don't blame them either. The government tries to provide them with everything on a platter and the young people are getting used to that.

With the widening educational access not being accompanied by simultaneous expansion of secure employment opportunities, students, while talking about their future worries and anxieties, were more apprehensive about their job prospects in the future as compared to the fulfilment of their higher educational aspirations. As another faculty member, Ms. Pratigya (F), remarked, "Few of the students will do well, but for most of them, I am very scared."

Conclusions

During the time of the study, higher education in Sikkim was in its initial phase of rapid expansion. In the past, most students in Sikkim had to look outside their state to meet their higher educational needs. This was, however, limited to those coming from the privileged social classes or those with the necessary merit to get a state scholarship to various colleges and universities across the country. From the mid 1990s, the state government started the process of expanding higher education in Sikkim. The intention was to provide quality higher education to all the students in Sikkim, especially those coming from the rural areas. Government degree colleges were established and simultaneously the number of private colleges and universities also started rising. In 2007, a central university, Sikkim University, was established. This further encouraged the growth of colleges in various parts of the state by providing them with the necessary affiliating body. The new university also provided the students with a variety of courses to pursue after their college education. There was, thus, greater access to higher education for students in Sikkim. These changes undoubtedly increased the inclusion of students, especially those in rural areas and at various margins, to participate in higher education and motivate them to continue studying longer. In this chapter, we saw the college students harboring high educational aspirations.

GCR, as a newly established institution in the expanding landscape of higher education in Sikkim, is a very interesting site to look at. Compared to the School, the College was a more marginal institution in many respects. The "low performers" from the humanities and vocational studies stream from the school (and other areas across Sikkim and neighboring West Bengal) often joined the College, usually after failing to get admitted to the more prominent colleges in the state and outside it. In addition, the College catered to those coming from marginal income families who lacked the resources to send their children outside the state. The College was a newly established institution that was operating from rented buildings. With the institution-building process still in its early phase, GCR, at first glance, had an atmosphere that felt provisional and tentative. The locals did not seem to take the College as a serious place of study and the students seem to think of it as the "last option." Newly recruited teachers, fresh out of universities, were posted in the College, largely in a temporary capacity. To add to that, the affiliating university, also a newly established institution, was implementing major curricular changes to the syllabus and the evaluation process. In a way, GCR almost felt like a testing ground to the assess the policy of providing higher educational access to rural students.

Despite these challenges, the College was an important space for the rural youth who would have been excluded from higher education had it not been there. The new curricular policies, the college administration and the enthusiasm of the young faculty members came together to provide the interested students with renewed eagerness to pursue and continue their higher educational journeys. Unlike the School, the College, offering only arts subjects, had no perceptible hierarchy based on subjects. Also, due to low student enrolment, the teachers were able to provide the students with individual attention and better teaching-learning experience. Nevertheless, the problem of low academic competency of the students at large and the ambitious curricular policies coming from the affiliating university proved difficult for the teachers to bring into line. The teachers were themselves being evaluated based on their students' performance. This led to a dominant practice of lax evaluation of the students, misreporting of student attendance and a relaxed attitude towards teaching by many teachers. This was, however, not approved by some of the better performing students and a small section of the teachers. Such practices served two functions. Firstly, they contributed to the College being regarded as a place where the "experiment" of rural higher education was a success as indicated by the performance of the students. This went down smoothly with the state government and the affiliating university, both parties invested into making the "experiment" of rural higher education work. Secondly, this ironically led to even the low performing students feeling included in the educational process and raising their aspirations for post-college education. The lax evaluation made the College a place wherein higher education was not just accessible but also easily realizable. This increased the students' confidence in undertaking higher levels of learning. Although, this can lead to an increase in student enrolment and participation in university education, it can also have major repercussion in the future when the students face a very competitive recruitment process for jobs.

Thus, the confidence that the students developed in GCR was not on built on solid foundations. As we listen to their own narratives about the limitations faced due to their government schooling background, low academic capabilities, financial constraints, and societal perceptions. The college students found themselves balancing the various contradictions in their lives. While the state opened access to higher education (and the college space demonstrated the actualization of just that), the students had to decide within the context of their individual families and wider socio-cultural expectations how much education was enough. Here, financial constraints, gender, community, and domiciled status intersected

with each other and made it possible for some students to either pursue their further studies and others to look for employment.

For students, most of whom were the first generation in their families to get a college level education, the context of low employment opportunities for the desirable, white-collar occupations posed a new dilemma. The students had to again decide if going for insecure jobs after college was viable or not. The students' high educational aspirations and decision to continue with further studies can also be read as a strategy to "wait" (Jeffrey, 2010) for better opportunities. The next chapter examines what happened to the students, both from the School and from the College, after they left these institutions within the larger context of employment within the state. It explores who, among them, were able to get the better end of the deal and who continued to find themselves at the margins.

CHAPTER SIX

Between Hope and Uncertainty: Youth, Education, and Employment

In Chapter Two, we highlighted that in the public imagination in Sikkim, the route to upward social mobility through education ideally ends in permanent jobs within the state government. In the pre-merger days in Sikkim, government appointment, especially at the higher levels of administration, was largely the domain of the privileged few owing to their access to the limited educational opportunities available at the time. Slowly, with the growth of education and rapid expansion of the state bureaucracy, it became possible for many to aspire for jobs within the public sector at various levels. During the first two decades, following the merger of Sikkim with India, there was mass recruitment by the state government. From the mid-1990s onwards with the saturation of jobs in the public sector, the increasing participation in school, as well as in higher education, was not supported by a simultaneous increase in government jobs. Yet, the aspirations for government jobs have stayed strong despite the efforts by the state to explore other avenues for employment.

In 2019-20, to better understand the plight of the young people in rural areas with respect to employment and higher education, we reached out to the students who had participated in the study in 2011-12 from both the school and the college and asked them about their educational pathways and employment status. This chapter attempts to locate the young people from the school and college within the larger context of youth, education, and employment in Sikkim. The chapter first looks at the employment scenario in Sikkim and then moves on to discuss the findings of the 2019-20 follow-up survey.

The Government Job "Obsession": The Politics of Employment in Sikkim

There has been a concerted effort in Sikkim to deal with rising unemployment rates, on one hand, and the high aspirations for government jobs, on the other, with the state government under pressure to create more jobs within the state. As early as 2001, *Sikkim Human Development Report,* stated that, "Sikkim needs to generate 6,500 jobs per annum in order to tackle the unemployment problem on a sustained basis" (Lama, 2001, p. 76). It further advocated that the creation of employment should be distributed equitably across agriculture, service, animal husbandry and industrial sectors. This has been an urgent need due to the high scale of recruitment by the state government. The Government of Sikkim employs one of the highest numbers of government employees among the north-eastern states. It has been

recommended that there was an urgent need for "rightsizing of the public sector" (Planning Commission, 2008, p. 56).

The state government has made various interventions and policies (GoS, 2015, p. 72-77) aimed at encouraging the job aspirants to diverse employment sectors. In March 2002, the Chief Minister's Self-Employment Scheme was created. It provided six-year interest free loans to unemployed youth to start their own businesses. In 2004-05, skill development programs and livelihood schools were launched and in 2010, the State Institute of Capacity Building was established as an umbrella organization for all the livelihood schools in Sikkim. In 2007, the government also established a new directorate of capacity building for providing vocational training to the educated, unemployed youth. By 2014, the government reported that 4,000 unemployed youths over the age of 18 had been trained by the 44 livelihood schools that had been established (GoS, 2015). With the state opening the doors to numerous pharmaceutical companies, hydel power projects, breweries, and other industries to set up their base in Sikkim, there have been expectations that the young will explore opportunities in the private sector.

Despite efforts at creating diverse employment opportunities, in the past decade, Sikkim has shown one of the highest unemployment rates in the country. National media outlets have highlighted the high rates of unemployment in Sikkim.[91] Quoting the data from the *Annual Employment and Unemployment Survey Reports* published by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India, these articles highlight the fact that amongst all the states in India, Sikkim had the highest unemployment rates in 2012-13 and 2014-15 (13.6 and 15.8 per cent respectively), and the second highest unemployment rate in 2015-16 (18.1 per cent).

Subba (2019), in an online news portal, writes that the high unemployment rates in Sikkim have been linked to an "excessive obsession with government jobs" and to the politics of officially identifying oneself as "unemployed", whereby, many of those who are either working as casual workers or are self-employed allegedly mark their work status as "unemployed" in the various surveys that are conducted. He further contends that there is "some semblance of pride as well as entitlement" attached to the status of being "unemployed" which makes it easy for the individuals concerned to "ask for various kinds of

[91] For examples of the emphasis placed by national media on the high unemployment rates of Sikkim see the following: Sikkim Has Maximum Unemployed; Chhattisgarh Lowest: Report (2013); Country's Unemployment Rate 4.7%: Labour Bureau Report (2013); Gujarat Logs Lowest Unemployment Rate, Sikkim Highest (2015); India's Unemployment Rate Highest in 5 years in 2015-16 (2016).

favours from the government and stake claims on numerous schemes and loans the government doles from time to time." Another editorial in a local newspaper, points out that the state's "obsessive protectionism" of ensuring local job opportunities for the domiciled Sikkimese has "invaded the public domain and made the young lazy" (To Protect and Promote, 2013, p. 2). In Chapter Five, we heard similar arguments concerning the dependency of the educated, unemployed youth on the government being articulated by the college teachers at GCR.

Keeping the strategies of being "unemployed" aside, the "obsession" with government jobs was also admitted by the students from the school and the college included in this study. In both the institutions, majority of the students who were from Sikkim wanted government jobs. That for them was a sign of success. "If I can get even a small job in the government then I think I can say I am successful," said Lendup (M, 3rd year college student, LMC).

Many of them also spoke about jobs in the private sector and felt that the jobs that were available to the locals were the lower-level ones, and that these jobs were often exploitative. While talking about the jobs that were being offered by the pharmaceutical companies located near Rhenock, one of the students, Santosh (M, 2nd year college student, LCU), stated, "You have to leave early in the morning and come late at night. You don't get bigger posts, only people from outside get the bigger posts."

Compared to the Sikkimese students, students from West Bengal were more open to private sector jobs. Sonia (F, 3rd year college student, LCL) who was from West Bengal talked about her preference for jobs in the private sector, "More than a government job, I would like to work in the private sector because you can expand your skills and your mind more in private jobs."

The difference between the students from Sikkim and those from West Bengal can be linked to the higher involvement of the state in the youth affairs in Sikkim. As Subba (2019) highlights, the young looked toward the state for employment and other kinds of "favours." The development of a politics of "benevolence" from above and that of "dependency" from below that has been said to characterize the relationship between the state and the people in Sikkim has also been connected to the "overdependence" on grants coming in from the Central Government:

> There was a time when the masses needed to be pampered. And they were. Now, Sikkim has to get more realistic, experiment with some effective empowerment. This transition to the next level will not be easy because indulgence is not easily

> abandoned…. The Sikkimese economy has survived [and quite obviously also prospered] on Central grants for far too long. While this patronage makes for comfortable living, it also makes the people lethargic…. the State takes care of everything from subsidizing rations to paying for the education of the children. The desire to work hard has atrophied and needs to be coaxed back into strength. (Empowered Futures, 2013, p. 2)

The "dependency" is enacted out most vividly in the arena of employment. The ruling government, despite various recommendations to set a limit to public sector employment, has found it difficult to ignore the high desirability for government jobs in Sikkim. As a political strategy, to accommodate the people's aspirations, the state government has consistently been recruiting temporary or non-regular employees in its various departments[92]. And those employed in such positions are willing to wait for the opportune moment when they can lobby for the regularization of their posts. This opportune moment, in Sikkim, is again usually when the general elections are close. In the past two decades, the various associations and groups representing the non-regular government employees have come out of their dormancy before every election. They hold rallies, protests, and campaigns for the regularization of their jobs. Knowing how to negotiate with the powers that be and when to do so are important strategies for the thousands employed on a temporary basis. The negotiation is made possible by the fact that many wait in such temporary jobs for years. An editorial in a local newspaper, writing about a procession taken out by ad hoc teachers in Gangtok demanding their services be regularized writes the following:

> There is much that is obviously wrong with the manner in which the State has been managing its human resource. An employment which continues for more than five years…should never have been temporary…. Thus, hiring on temporary basis only in emergency situations and then having the posts filled with regular after a gap of [at

[92] According to the statistics uploaded by the Directorate of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation (DESME), Government of Sikkim in its website, out of a total of 70,114 (53 per cent) state government employees, 37,196 (47 per cent) persons were regular employees while 32,918 persons were non-regular (which included the categories of 'muster roll', 'ad hoc', 'consolidated', 'honorarium', 'co-terminus', 'home guard', 'elected' and 'others') employees (DESME, n.d.). Additionally, the public sector undertakings employed a total of 3,397 persona which included both regular and non-regular employees (ibid). (As the data was not dated, a personal communication with one of the officials at DESME revealed that the statistics was uploaded in the year 2015 and was based on a survey carried out by DESME itself. We were not able to get further information or access to any published literature.)

the most 6 months] should be notified as a govt policy now. (Employment News, 2013, p. 2)

A more recent and interesting example of how the state nurtures high aspirations for government jobs in Sikkim can be that of the One Family One Job (OFOJ) Scheme. In early January 2019, few months before the general elections, the then Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) led government announced the OFOJ Scheme. The then Chief Minister, Pawan Chamling, announced 20,000 jobs to be given to Sikkimese youth who had no immediate family member working with the government. The explicit aim was to have every family in Sikkim with at least one member employed in the public sector, the quintessential criteria for a "secure" and "stable" life[93]. The jobs, however, were contractual. Nevertheless, it was announced that the posts would be made permanent in due time. The 20,000 jobs that were offered were mostly in the lower-level administration (Class III and IV) in 12 departments of the Government of Sikkim. The government officials in these departments were suddenly faced with the huge task of creating these posts within their departments, many of which were already overburdened with excess number of employees, both permanent and contractual.

The announcement of the OFOJ Scheme gave rise to varied reactions. Many saw it as a populist, political gimmick and a poorly conceptualized policy that would lead to more saturation of public sector jobs. It was seen as a desperate effort to draw in young voters by an incumbent government that had been ruling the state for 25 years. Despite all the criticisms, eligible young people from all over Sikkim came forward to receive their appointment letters. Many students dropped out of colleges and private sector employees left their jobs. For the young applicants, this was the window they were waiting for. What is interesting about the OFOJ is the way the state's efforts to encourage the young to join other sectors of employment was put aside. The political future of any party has come to depend on accommodating the aspirations of the people for government employment. Over the years, this has, inadvertently, led to the creation of large number of casual and temporary jobs within the public sector.

Armed with their freshly acquired educational qualifications and confronted by the scarcity of the highly valued government jobs, the younger population were in limbo. For

[93] It is a popular notion in Sikkim (and probably elsewhere in India) that having at least one member in the family employed in the government adds to the family's overall welfare. Employment in the public sector provides a steady flow of income and the various benefits, especially with respect to healthcare, that comes with the job is something that can be accessed by all members of the immediate family.

many, the aspirations for government jobs often entailed a long period of waiting in uncertainty. The *Sikkim Human Development Report 2014* describes the status quo of the young population in Sikkim:

> Addressing the concern of young people has to become a priority. As society moves into the era of Facebook and Twitter, the signs of change are palpable. With prospects of finding worthwhile and decent livelihoods becoming increasingly challenging, young people are becoming restive. The days of garnering an easy job with the government are gone. The writing on the wall is clear. At the same time, the new generation in Sikkim is not able to compete in the globalized world. Protests and other forms of making frustrations public are occurring more frequently. Adding to the tensions is the issue of jobs being created only to be lapped up by people who come from outside the state. The growing frustration of unfulfilled aspirations combined with easy availability of banned substances is causing many of the young to become drug addicts. Sikkim also has a higher rate of suicides. Over the past decade, the rate of suicide has remained consistently higher than the national average. Though the overall suicide rate (number of suicides per 1 lakh persons) came down to 29 in 2012, a disturbing feature is that the rate is higher among the youth than any other age group. Between 2001 and 2011, 677 out of 1,743 victims of suicide were from the age group of 15-29 years. Appropriate policies and interventions are urgently needed to prevent the young from taking their own lives. (GoS, 2015, p. xxiv)

The above excerpt emphasizes the scarcity of government jobs, the low employability of the young people, and the impact of in-migration on the labor market. It links these factors to increased frustration, high incidence of drug use and high rates of suicide among the youth. However, the term "youth" is used in a generic sense. The important question to ask is, who among the younger population in Sikkim are the most vulnerable. According to the *State Socio-Economic Census 2006*, almost 88 per cent of those unemployed in Sikkim were from the rural areas (DESME, 2006). This brings us back to the issue of marginality of youth from the rural areas of Sikkim. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, the school and the college were sites where rural students, most of whom were the first generation to venture into higher education, were forming high educational and occupational goals. In the rest of the chapter, I discuss the main findings from the follow-up survey to show how privilege and marginality plays out in the lives of these students. For most of the participants, their educational and occupational attainment were not what they had envisioned while they were in the school and in the college.

Higher Educational Trajectories after School and College

To aid in the explanation of the findings, I am dividing the students into three categories based on their higher educational achievement:

1. Low attainers – refers to the participants who did not study beyond school or the senior secondary level[94].
2. Moderate attainers - includes all the participants who had completed their undergraduate courses (both degree and professional) and those who did a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) course or a diploma after their UG level studies (i.e., the 'Others' category in the Tables).
3. High attainers – includes those who completed their postgraduation and studied even further (B.Ed., Master of Philosophy [M.Phil.], Doctor of Philosophy [Ph.D.]) studies.

Out of the initial 119 school students in the 2011-12 survey, 74 participated in the follow-up survey (2019-20).[95] All 30 college students included earlier participated in the same. For majority of the participants from both the College and the School, there was a major gap between their high aspirations what they had attained by 2019-20.

From the School (GSR) (Table 6.1), all the student participants had wanted to continue their studies after school, but a few of them (7) had not been able to do so. As for the rest who continued their studies after school, majority of them had attained much lower educational qualifications than they had planned for while they were in school. Thus, the low attainers comprised 10 per cent of the total, while 65 per cent of students were moderate attainers and 25 per cent were high attainers.

Even in the College (Table 6.2), despite high aspirations of all for further studies, most of them (60 per cent) stopped studying after college while 40 per cent went on to study further. While some did a B.Ed. or diploma courses (10 per cent), some did postgraduate

[94] By its very definition, the category of low attainers does not apply to the college sample as all the participants from college eventually did complete their UG level. So, in the college sample we shall use only two categories, that of moderate and high attainers.

[95] As mentioned in Chapter One, the loss of sample between the first and the follow-up survey is of crucial importance to better contextualize the analysis of the data in this chapter. It is to be noted here that comparing the social class profile of the ones who responded to those who did not (or could not be contacted), majority of those from the LMC and LCU category participated in the follow-up survey, while from the LCL, majority (11 out of 16) did not participate. Thus, it is important to remember that the representation of participants is skewed in the favor of those from LMC and LCU backgrounds.

Table 6.1

School Students' Level of Education Aspired (2011-12) and Attained (2019-20)

Level of Education	Aspired (2011-12)		Attained (2019-20)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Senior Secondary School	-	-	7[a]	10
Undergraduate (UG)	6	8	44	60
Postgraduate (PG)	31	42	15	20
Above PG[b]	37	50	4	5
Others[c]	-	-	4	5
Total	74	100	74	100

Note:

[a] Out of the 7 students who studied till Senior Secondary School level, two were B.A. dropouts.

[b] Includes those students who had done their B.Ed. after their M.A./M.Sc.

[c] Includes 3 who had completed their B.Ed. after B.A. and 1 with a Diploma in Primary Education after B.A.

Table 6.2

College Students' Level of Education Aspired (2011-12) and Attained (2019-20)

Level of Education	Aspired (2011-12)		Attained (2019-20)	
	No.	%	No.	%
Undergraduate (UG)	3	10	18	60
Postgraduate (PG)	12	40	3	10
Above PG[a]	15	50	6	20
Others (B.Ed/Diplomas)[b]	-	-	3	10
Total	30	100	30	100

Note:

[a] Includes those students who had done their B.Ed. after their M.A. Only 1 student had completed her M.Phil. degree.

[b] Includes 2 who had done their B.Ed. after college and 1 who had done a diploma in hotel management.

studies (10 per cent). As for those who studied further after PG (20 per cent), most had completed a B.Ed. course.

As I have mentioned in earlier chapters, the gap between the aspired and attained level of education can be understood, to an extent, by conceptualizing the aspirations quoted by students in the first survey as their "idealistic aspirations" (Kintrea et al, 2011) or "doxic aspirations" (Zipin et al., 2013) or what (Hart, 2014:137) simply calls "preferences". Students, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, were not certain if they would be able to follow them up later. Doubts about their own academic abilities and constraints of financial and other forms of resources were quite instrumental in making the students taper down their aspirations to make choices that were more feasible.

The following sections will explore primarily the influence of class and gender on the participants' educational attainment. Being from the rural lower-middle and lower classes, the participants in general were equipped with lower stocks of *capital* (economic, cultural, and social). There were, however, some who did better than the rest.

Educational attainment, class, and gender. With some exceptions, the survey data shows the major influence of the social class of the participants on the level of education attained (Table 6.3 and 6.4). This is more evident in the case of participants from the School, GSR, (probably due to the larger sample size and more diverse class backgrounds of students). Among school participants, majority (5 out of 7) of the low attainers, who had stopped studying after school, came from the lower social classes. The other 2 belonging to the lower-middle class had joined the College, GCR, but had not completed their course after failing in their end-semester examination. Most of the students from the school and the college were moderate attainers. This was true for each of the social class categories, namely, lower-middle (LMC), lower (upper) (LCU), and lower (lower) (LCL) classes. Taking a closer look within each of the social class category, we can, however, see that there were certain variations between the different occupational groups.

From the school sample, within the LMC, children of low professionals and those of small businessmen were equally distributed between those who had high and moderate educational attainment. Looking at the high attainers within the lower-middle class, the children of the small businessmen and that of low professionals were more compared to those whose parents were in clerical occupations. Among the moderate attainers, students whose parents worked in the clerical jobs formed the majority. This points at the higher stocks of cultural and economic capital possessed by those coming from professional and business

categories, compared to the clerical employees[96]. Among the LCU and LCL categories, the majority of those who went for higher education were moderate attainers. However, the children of the small farmers and entrepreneurs fared better (half of them were high attainers) than the rest in terms of educational attainment. Nevertheless, if we look at the high attainers overall, among the school students, we can clearly see that a greater number of them came from the lower-middle class as compared to the lower social classes.

In the college sample, we see a similar pattern. Majority of the participants were moderate attainers. As in the school sample, among the high attainers, the students from the lower-middle class were the ones who studied the longest, and from the lower social classes, the children of the small farmers were quite highly represented in the higher-level studies.[97]

The small farmer category is an interesting one. The children of the small farmers were largely domiciled Sikkimese.[98] While many of the marginal workers did not have a domiciled status, the small farmers did have an advantage over the others from the lower classes since they owned land and had a domiciled status. These relatively higher advantages possessed by the domiciled small farmers, as compared to the others in the lower social class group, probably enabled them to wait and let their children study longer, especially when it came to accessing higher education within the state.

For most of the female participants, the furthest level of education they could achieve was their undergraduate level. In the school sample (Table 6.5), while male students were more represented among either those who stopped studying after school (5 out of 7) or among those who went for post-graduate (10 out of 15) and above post-graduate (3 out of 4) levels of study. The female students were highly concentrated at the level of undergraduate (30 out of 44) studies or were those who pursued B.Ed./Diploma after B.A. (4 out of 4). Few (6) of the female students who went on to do their post-graduate and above PG levels of study were largely from the LMC, especially whose fathers were small businessmen and low professionals.

[96] The clerical employees, as discussed in Chapter Three and Four, were largely those with low levels of education and were employed in Class III and Class IV jobs within the government or private sectors.

[97] Taking both the school and college sample together, out of the total number 14 students (7 each) who were high attainers from the lower social classes, 8 (4 each) of them were children of small farmers.

[98] In the school out of 13 children of small farmers, 5 were from bordering villages of West Bengal, and in the college, out of 16 children of small farmers only 1 was from West Bengal. In the school out of the 5 participants who were from West Bengal only 2 were high attainers (1 did his masters from IGNOU), while in the college the only student who was from the small farmer category from West Bengal did not pursue further studies after college.

Table 6.3

Level of Education Attained by Social Class: School Students

Level of Education Attained	Social Class																							
	Lower Middle Class								Lower Class (Upper)								Lower Class (Lower)						All Classes	
	Low Professional		Clerical		Small Business		Total		Petty Business		Skilled & Semi-skilled Manual		Small Farmers		Total		Unskilled Manual		Low agriculturalist		Total		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Senior Secondary School	1	20	1	5	-	-	2	5	1	17	3	38	-	-	4	15	-	-	1	25	1	20	7	10
Undergraduate (UG)	2	40	17	77	8	53	27	64	5	83	3	38	7	54	15	56	1	100	1	25	2	40	44	60
Postgraduate (PG)	2	40	1	5	7	47	10	24	-	-	2	25	2	15	4	15	-	-	1	25	1	20	15	20
Beyond PG	-	-	2	9	-	-	2	5	-	-	-	-	2	15	2	7	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5
Others	-	-	1	5	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	-	2	15	2	7	-	-	1	25	1	20	4	5
Total	5	100	22	101	15	100	42	100	6	100	8	101	13	99	27	100	1	100	4	100	5	100	74	100

Table 6.4

Level of Education Attained by Social Class: College Students

Level of Education Attained	Social Class																							
	Lower Middle Class								Lower Class (Upper)								Lower Class (Lower)						All Classes	
	Low Professional		Clerical		Small Business		Total		Petty Business		Skilled & Semi-skilled Manual		Small Farmer		Total		Unskilled Manual		Low agriculturalist		Total		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Undergraduate (UG)	1	33	3	75	1	50	5	56	-	-	1	100	10	63	11	61	-	-	2	67	2	67	18	60
Postgraduate (PG)	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	100	-	-	3	19	4	22	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	13
Beyond PG	1	33	1	25	1	50	3	33	-	-	-	-	1	6	1	6	-	-	1	33	1	33	5	17
Others	1	33	-	-	-	-	1	11	-	-	-	-	2	13	2	11	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	10
Total	3	99	4	100	2	100	9	100	1	100	1	100	16	101	18	100	-	-	3	100	3	100	30	100

Table 6.5

Level of Education Attained by Gender: School Students

Level of Education Attained	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Senior Secondary School	4	13	3	7	7	10
Undergraduate (UG)	14	45	30	70	44	60
Postgraduate (PG)	10	32	5	12	15	20
Above/Beyond PG	3	10	1	2	4	5
Others	-	-	4	9	4	5
Total	31	100	43	100	74	100

Table 6.6

Level of Education Attained by Gender: College Students

Level of Education Completed	Male		Female		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Undergraduate (UG)	3	43	15	65	18	60
Postgraduate (PG)	1	14	2	9	3	10
Above/Beyond PG	3	43	3	13	6	20
Others (B.Ed./Diplomas)	-	-	3	13	3	10
Total	7	100	23	100	30	100

The same can be seen in the college sample (Table 6.6). Although the number of female students (23 out of 30) in the college were triple the number of male students (7 out of 30), only one-third of the female students pursued further studies after college. The male students were, to an extent, equally distributed between those who did not continue higher studies after college and those who did. Female students were mostly clustered at the undergraduate level and more sparsely present at higher levels of study. Also, the female students who studied longer belonged to LMC and LCU categories, while the female students

from the LCL (2) did not study beyond graduation. Thus, to some extent, class mediated with gender to create possibilities for some and limitations for the others.

Spatial mobility and educational destinations. We have seen in Chapter Four, higher educational options for science, commerce and vocational studies were not available in Rhenock. The only choice for those wishing to pursue higher studies in these streams was to move out of Rhenock. For the humanities (and vocational) students, GCR, the degree college chosen for the study, was a viable choice for those who lacked resources to go outside Rhenock. The subject choices of school students were contingent upon their financial circumstances, gender, familial expectations, and academic ability. The streaming of students into various subjects was not just based on student aptitude and interest. Students who knew that they had less chances of exploring higher educational options away from home, made very conscious choices of opting for humanities so that they could stay in Rhenock and continue studying.

From the survey (2019-20) data, we can divide the students into three groupings based on where they went for their higher education: those who went out of Sikkim; those who studied in other towns of Sikkim (chiefly, Gangtok and Namchi); and those who stayed back in Rhenock. The aspiration of most of the participants was to go out of Rhenock for further studies. That, however, was limited to only a few, as the data shows.

First, I shall discuss the school data. For their undergraduate education, only 9 of the participants went out of Sikkim to study. 21 went to other places inside Sikkim and a majority, i.e., 36 students stayed back in Rhenock and studied at GCR. Those who went out of Sikkim (9) were from the LMC (5 from small business, 2 from low professional, and 2 from clerical families). Among the LMC, out of those who pursued further studies, 23 per cent (9 out of 40) of them went out of Sikkim, 30 per cent (12 out of 40) left Rhenock but remained inside Sikkim, and 48 per cent (19 out of 40) stayed back in Rhenock for their further studies. Among the LCU, 30 per cent (7 out of 23) went out of Rhenock but inside Sikkim and an overwhelming 70 per cent (16 out of 23) stayed back in Rhenock for their undergraduate level studies. As for the LCL participants, half (2 out of 4) of them stayed back in Rhenock and other two attended other colleges inside Sikkim.

Although the lower-middle class students attended higher educational institutions inside Sikkim, majority of them were children of those working in the clerical or lower-level service jobs (20 out of 31), and in terms of proportion, the percentage was much lower than that of the participants from the lower social classes. To sum up, the degree of spatial mobility of the lower-middle class students, especially the children of the low professionals

and small businessmen, was higher compared to that of their peers from the lower social classes. For the students coming from the lower classes, the institutions inside Sikkim and especially the college in Rhenock, were their realistic option for higher education.

Like the lower social class students, female students were also relatively less mobile than their male counterparts. Only 12 per cent (5 out of 41) of the female students went out of Sikkim for higher studies while 24 per cent (10 out of 41) studied in other places inside Sikkim. A huge majority, 63 per cent (26 out of 41), remained in Rhenock and studied in GCR. Among the male students, 14 per cent (4 out of 27) went out of Sikkim, 41 per cent (11 out of 27) moved to other places inside Sikkim and 44 per cent (12 out of 25) stayed back and studied in GCR.

For the post-graduate level, in the school sample, out of the total of 15 participants, only 6 students went out of Sikkim to study, 6 studied inside Sikkim and 3 students pursued their masters through distance courses. Lower-middle class students were more represented among those who studied outside the state (5 out of 6). While students who studied inside Sikkim were from all the three social class categories. Among those who did their B.Ed. degrees either after the undergraduate or after postgraduate level, all studied inside Sikkim except for one student who did his B.Ed. from Siliguri in West Bengal.

Among the college students, the very fact that they were studying in Rhenock shows that the students were less mobile. Out of the total of 12 students who pursued further studies, 9 students studied inside Sikkim. For post-graduation, Sikkim University and the government college in Gangtok were the two preferred destinations, while for their B.Ed. degree, it was the government college in Soreng in West Sikkim.

Only 2 out of the 12 students (both male; 1 LMC, low professionals; and 1 LCU, small farmer) did their post-graduation outside Sikkim (1 in West Bengal and the other in Uttarkhand) and 1 student (female, lower-upper class, small farmer) did a short three-month diploma from Bangalore.

Occupation, Social Mobility and Ambiguities

In 2019-20, except for one student each in both school and college sample[99], majority of the students had completed their education Many of them were either working (56 from school, 21 from college) or looking for work, i.e., unemployed (18 from school and 9 from college).

[99] Only 1 male student in the school sample was still pursuing his B.Ed. degree and 1 female student in the college sample was planning to pursue her Ph.D.

Majority of the unemployed female students identified themselves as currently being housewives (14 from school and 8 from college).[100]

Upwardly mobile and unemployed: Class, gender, and occupational status. For students from the lower social classes (LCU and LCL), participation in higher education had resulted in a shift to white-collar occupations from the manual or agricultural work of their parents. In the school sample, none of the students had taken up petty business, manual or agricultural work (with one exception[101]). A similar trend was seen among college students. Leaving aside those currently unemployed, in both the school and the college sample, the participants, who were currently employed, were largely working in what has been categorized in the study as lower-middle class professions. The upwardly mobile, in both the school and college data were largely the lower-class participants. They were, however, engaged in the lower-middle class, white-collar jobs. In that sense, we can say that there has been some upward occupational mobility between the parents' and the children's generation. It is important to note that there were distinctions between the children of various occupational groups within the lower social class. Those coming from the small farmers category were more likely to work as low professionals. Participants from the petty business, manual and low agriculture groups mostly entered clerical and lower-level white collar jobs.

For the lower-middle social class, to a great extent, there was horizontal instead of vertical mobility. Although 7 of them (19 per cent) were engaged in higher professional occupations, the rest worked in lower-middle class professions. To reiterate, in terms of inter-class mobility, it can be said that access to higher levels of education had the most impact on the manual and laboring families rather than those coming from the lower-middle class professions.

When compared to their father's occupation, an interesting observation can be made in relation to unemployed student participants. Although gender was a major factor, as we shall discuss further, in being unemployed, the ability of participants to wait for something better and a lesser urgency to work was pertinent. For those coming from more marginal backgrounds, as we have discussed in the previous chapters, the lack of financial resources meant that the pressure to enter work was much greater. In both the school and the college data (2019-20), the participants whose parents were from the lower middle class (especially

[100] Among the female students who gave their work status as being housewives, a few of them informed me that they were looking towards joining work in the near future.
[101] 1 male student from a village in West Bengal after completing his masters through distance education was working on his family farm.

Table 6.7

School (Student) Participants' Occupation (2019-20) by Father's Occupation

Father's Occupational Category	Occupational Status (2019-20) of the Students Participants (School)																					
	High Professional		Low Professional		Clerical		Small business and entrepreneur		Petty business		Skilled and semi-skilled manual		Small farmer		Unskilled manual		Low agriculturalist		Unemployed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
High Professional	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Low Professional	2	25	1	8	2	6	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	7
Clerical	2	25	4	33	8	24	1	50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	39	22	30
Small business and entrepreneur	3	38	1	8	4	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	7	39	15	20
Petty business	-	-	-	-	5	15	1	50	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	8
Skilled and semi-skilled manual	1	13	0	-	4	12	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	17	8	11
Small farmer	-	-	5	42	6	18	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	100	-	-	-	-	1	6	13	18
Unskilled manual	-	-	-	-	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	1
Low agriculturalist	-	-	1	8	3	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	5
Unemployed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	8	101	12	99	33	99	2	100	-	-	-	-	1	100	-	-	-	-	18	101	74	100

Table 6.8

College (Student) Participants' Current Occupation (2019-20) by Father's Occupation

Father's Occupational Category	Occupational Status (2019-20) of the Student Participants (College)																					
	High Professional		Low Professional		Clerical		Small business and entrepreneur		Petty business		Skilled and semi-skilled manual		Small farmer		Unskilled manual		Low agriculturalist		Unemployed		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
High Professional	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Low Professional	-	-	2	33	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	11	3	10
Clerical	-	-	1	17	2	17	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	11	4	13
Small business and entrepreneur	-	-	-	-	1	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	11	2	7
Petty business	-	-	-	-	1	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3
Skilled and semi-skilled manual	-	-	-	-	1	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	3
Small farmers	-	-	2	33	7	58	1	100	1	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5	56	16	53
Unskilled manual	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Low agriculturalists	-	-	1	17	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	11	3	10
Unemployed	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Total	-	-	6	100	12	99	1	100	1	100	1	100	-	-	-	-	-	-	9	100	30	99

the small business category) had higher rates of unemployment as compared to those with parents from the lower-class occupations. However, among the lower-class occupations, the small farmers category had a relatively higher incidence of children who were still unemployed. Also, a few of the participants were still pursuing or wanting to pursue further studies. And these students came from either the lower-middle class or from the small farming families of the lower social class.[102]

There were, however, few differences between participants that pointed to college students being relatively more disadvantaged than the school participants when it came to occupational attainment. As we have discussed in the previous chapter, the college catered to those students who were, due to various constraints, unable to study outside Rhenock. The college students, thus, were more marginal than those in the school and this was reflected in their occupational statuses as well. The students from the college, even those coming from the lower middle classes, showed relatively showed lesser upward occupational mobility as compared to the school participants. Lower-middle class participants from the School, especially those from the small business and low professional families, did significantly better than those from the College. 8 participants (2 from low professionals, 2 from clerical, 3 from small business, 1 from the skilled manual categories) from the school were working as high professionals, while among college participants there were none. The highest level of occupational attainment of college participants was that of low professionals. There was also a higher probability among students from college (especially those from lower social class) to settle for lower-level occupations such as petty business and manual work.[103]

The relationship between gender and employment is also complex. Although there were some similarities between the male and female participants, there were significant differences as well. Beginning with the similarities, in both the school and college sample, majority of those employed were concentrated in clerical, lower-level white collar jobs. In fact, the percentage of males to the total number of male participants who were working in clerical jobs in both the school and the college was higher than that of the females. In the

[102] For instance, in the college sample, one female student (lower middle class, small business) after completing her M.Phil. wanted to still pursue her Ph.D. In the school, while the female participants all identified as housewives, the 3 unemployed, male students, all of whom had completed their post-graduation, were either looking for a job (2 out of 3, both lower middle class, small business) or was still pursuing their education (1 out of 3, lower class upper, small farmer).

[103] As we mentioned above, while in the school, only 1 (out of 74) student was in the lower social class occupation (small farmer), in the college 2 (out of 30) students were working in lower-level occupations (1 in petty business and 1 in skilled manual categories).

school sample, a higher percentage of females were working in low professional jobs compared to the percentage of males doing the same, while the reverse was true in case of the college participants.

The differences between the occupational destinations of male and female students are also important. Among the unemployed in the school sample, out of a total of 18 persons, 15 were females. In the college sample, all the unemployed were females. Females were more likely to be unemployed compared to the males. This maybe because of the socio-cultural notion that sons more than daughters or daughters-in-law were expected to be the main breadwinners. Marriage was a major factor for the female students to either discontinue their education or leave work. In the college, 5 out of the total of 9 unemployed female participants, had stopped working post marriage. Even among school students, 2 females had married after finishing school and not pursued higher education. Except for 1 student each from the school and the college, all the female students categorized as unemployed were married and they identified as housewives.

Among the employed female participants from the school, majority were concentrated in clerical, lower-level white collar jobs (16 out of 28) or working as low professionals (9 out of 28), mostly as schoolteachers. Even among the high professionals, only 7 per cent of the females were working as high professionals compared to the 16 per cent of the males. In the college sample, majority of them were mostly concentrated in clerical work (9 out of 14 employed) and only 3 (out of 14) were in low professional jobs while the remaining 2 were engaged in petty business and skilled manual work respectively. Compared to the females, although the males from GCR were lesser in number, a relatively higher proportion (4 out of 7 i.e., 43 per cent) of them were working as low professionals. Thus, female students from both the School and the College were not faring as well as their male counterparts. However, in terms of occupational attainment, female participants from the School were doing a little better than those from the College.

Looking more closely at the social background of the women participants, we do find that the female participants from the lower middle class were at an advantage compared to those from the lower social classes. First, from the school data, we find that all the women (3) working as high professionals came from the lower middle class. More than half of the low professional women (5 out of 9) also came from the lower middle class. The remaining 4 were those from the small farmer and entrepreneur families. Compared to the lower social classes where the majority were working in clerical jobs, most of the working female participants from the lower middle class were in professional jobs. In the college sample too

the lower-middle class women were either working in white collar jobs or were unemployed. Among those from the lower classes, only 1 (small farmer category) was working as a low professional while the rest were engaged in clerical (6), petty business (1), and skilled and semi-skilled manual (1) work.

Among the female students who were unemployed in the school sample, majority (12 out of 15) were also from the lower middle class. Among the college participants, however, the unemployed women were distributed between the lower middle class and the lower classes (specifically the small farmer category). As pointed out earlier, for both genders, it can be conjectured that the unemployed women probably had the option to not work instead of working in what was viewed as low paid or low status jobs. This may not have been the case for the young women coming from the families with very marginal incomes. What is interesting here again is that among the lower social classes, both upper and lower, the daughters of the small farmers or entrepreneurs were more akin to the lower-middle class than to the lower-class participants when it came to their occupational status. In other words, like lower-middle class women, they too had the option not to work in case preferred employment was not at hand. It again points to the fact that the children of small farmers did enjoy higher stocks of economic and social capital, compared to those in the lower class.

Government jobs inside Sikkim: Patterns and preferences. The preference for government jobs was quite apparent in the sample. Despite the saturation of jobs in the public sector and the intense competition for the same, we can see in both the school and the college, a relatively high proportion of those employed were in government jobs. In the school sample, majority of those employed were working in the public sector. 31 were government employees and 23 were working in private jobs. Among college participants, those working in government jobs (9) was only slightly less that the private sector employees (10). Only 4 participants, two each from the school and the college were self-employed. Both self-employed participants from the School were males (one was working as an entrepreneur while another was a small farmer). From the College, one was female (petty shopkeeper) and the other male (political worker cum entrepreneur).

In the private sector, a large majority of the participants (14 from the school, and 8 from the college) worked in lower-level administrative jobs in the pharmaceutical companies and in various small business establishments (such as shops, hotels, beauty parlors) inside Sikkim. Out of those who had gone out of Sikkim for work (9 from school and 2 from college), only 3 participants from the school were working as high professionals in multi-national companies in Bangalore and New Delhi, all of whom had professional degrees. All 3

were from the lower middle class (2 from small business and 1 from low professional families). The others working outside Sikkim were engaged in lower-level service jobs like those working inside the state. Besides going to the Indian metropolitan cities to work, going abroad, especially the Gulf countries, to work was also an option.[104] One female student (lower-middle class, clerical) from the school was working in Dubai after completing her undergraduate education from a college in Sikkim.[105]

As many as 31 (out of 56) of the school participants were employed in the public sector, in both state (25) and central government (6) jobs. Within the state government, two (both males) were working as were as high professionals (as an engineer and a doctor). Others worked as low professionals (23), mostly as schoolteachers, nurses, clerical, or lower administrative work (especially as Group C and Group D employees). Those working for the central government were mostly in the armed forces at the lower-level ranks. With more than half of the employed participants working in the public sector, we can see the desirability of government jobs among the young people.

Among the college participants, 9 (out of a total 21 employed) were working in the public sector (8 were working for the state and 1 for the central government). Those working for the state government were mostly schoolteachers (5) and lower-level administrative staff (3). The sole central government employee was in the armed forces (Indian Reserve Battalion or IRB) but posted in Sikkim.

Domiciled status was an important aspect of government employment is to look at those migrating out of the state for work. As discussed in Chapter Two, due to the strict adherence of Rule 4 (4) of the Sikkim Establishment Rules, 1974, preference was given to Sikkimese locals for recruitment to the state government. All participants working for the Government of Sikkim were those with domiciled status in Sikkim. In the school sample, interestingly, out of the 6 central government employees, 4 (3 males and 1 female) were from Sikkim. They had joined the armed forces and primarily belonged to the lower social classes (petty business, manual and low agriculture). One was posted in Sikkim. In the private sector, those who did not have a domiciled status in Sikkim can be seen to have migrated outside the state. From the school sample, those migrating out for work, were from the Marwari Bihari

[104] This was not infrequent among the young working population in the rural areas of Sikkim. The work that they took up abroad were mostly in the lower-level service and manual sectors.

[105] One female college participant (lower-lower class, low agriculturalist) had also gone to the Gulf to work. She had, however, returned, and at the time of the survey, was married and not employed.

business families (2) or from West Bengal (4). Only 2 were from Sikkim. In the college sample, among those working outside Sikkim, 2 had domiciled status. One (LMC, small business) had immigrated to the US and worked in the service sector and the other (LCL, low agriculturalist) was teaching in West Bengal.

Looking at the above data, it can be maintained that majority of the Sikkimese students were working within the state. The few who went out to work were paradoxically either those from marginal income families seeking work in the lower service sectors or those from the more stable lower-middle class families who were offered well-paying jobs outside Sikkim. For the students without the Sikkimese domiciled status, they either worked in the private sector inside Sikkim or sought work opportunities outside the state.

Uncertain futures. Despite the variations based on gender and class background, an overall view of the occupational status of the participants reveals important trends. Although many had made the shift to white-collar jobs from the manual and agricultural sector (that their parents had worked in), there appeared to be an invisible barrier in accessing higher-level professional jobs. Of the total employed, participants in both the school (47 out of 56, 84 per cent) and the college sample (19 out of 21, 91 per cent) were engaged in lower-middle class jobs. Although some school participants were working as high professionals (8 out of 56, 14 per cent), it was the lower-middle class jobs that the highest number of college participants were engaged in. Among the lower-middle class jobs, participants were mostly concentrated in the lower-level clerical work, in both the private and the public sector.

The jobs that the school and college participants had were not secure. In the private sector, most of the participants were working on temporary and insecure contracts. For instance, the pharmaceutical companies, where most participants were employed recruited their employees through direct interview or through job contractors. The ones who were hired directly by the companies did receive additional benefits besides their salary. Those hired through the contractors were working under precarious conditions. They had to pay the contractors an agreed upon portion of their salary and were usually not entitled to various benefits enjoyed by the regular employees. For both categories of employees, especially in the lower-level jobs, the job continuity was performance-based and therefore not as secure as regular public sector jobs. The same was true for those working with business establishments inside Sikkim. As for those working outside the state, as mentioned earlier, only a few had well-paying jobs as engineers or business executives in multinational companies, while the rest were engaged in lower-level service sector jobs.

Although government jobs were highly regarded, majority of government employees were working in non-regular jobs. In the school sample, out of the total of 31, 20 participants were working in ad hoc (non-regular) jobs. Among the college participants, 6 out of a total of 9, were non-regular employees.

Interestingly, 9 participants from school and 1 from college were working under the OFOJ Scheme introduced by the government in 2019. Looking at the educational qualification of the those working in the OFOJ jobs, there seemed to be quite a mismatch between the educational qualifications of the participants and the level of work they were employed for. The OFOJ jobs, as we have mentioned earlier, were mostly in the lower-level administration which required a school completion certificate or even lower educational qualifications. Majority of the participants who had joined the OFOJ jobs were, thus, over-qualified for the positions they held. 2 students had post graduate degrees (one of them also had a B.Ed.), 1 had a B.A. and a B.Ed. degree, 5 had bachelor's degrees, and only one had studied till the senior secondary school. This undoubtedly points to the enormous pressure on the young people in the state to join any government job being offered regardless of their qualifications or aptitude.

Conclusions

Increased access to higher education certainly has been transformative for the students in the rural areas of Sikkim. With higher educational degrees in hand, young people have been able to move out of manual and agricultural occupations that the older generation were engaged in and to compete for white-collar jobs. For young people from marginal backgrounds, modern education may promise a "better" future, the security provided by such futures is something that needs to be interrogated. As Levinson and Holland (1996) state:

> Ironically, schooled knowledges and disciplines may, while offering certain freedoms and opportunities, at the same time further draw students into dominant projects of nationalism and capitalist labor formation, or bind them even more tightly to systems of class, gender, and race inequality. (p. 1)

Schools and newly established colleges in rural Sikkim are spaces where the children of the lower-middle and lower classes are encouraged to form new aspirations through advanced educational pathways. However, due to economic constraints, gendered expectations, or even, in the case of Sikkim, local or non-local identities, find themselves "stuck in the middle." Majority of the participants, especially women and those from the lower social classes, had encountered resistance in their efforts towards higher educational

and occupational attainment. Despite their high aspirations and the fact that most of them had a college degree, they were mainly engaged in lower-level white collar jobs.

Although Sikkimese domiciled students did enjoy a certain level of security owing to their relatively access to higher educational and employment opportunities within the state, in general, the participants in the study found themselves mostly occupying the margins of the employment structure. Most were employed as casual worker with a veneer of legitimacy given by the fact that these jobs were in the public sector. To add to that, high obligations to their families and their communities made it difficult for them to just leave and look for better opportunities outside the state even if it were available. They had to work in Sikkim. Even those who had acquired higher level educational qualifications had to often look for jobs that were closer to home and compliant with the dominant discourse of success, which was obtaining a government job, even if temporary or ad hoc.

There were few outliers among the participants. Those who were able to continue into higher levels of education including professional courses and access the new jobs in the metropolitan cities in India's liberalized economy. This trajectory, however, was more possible for the privileged among the participants, those from low professional and small business families. Looking at the picture presented by the findings of the follow-up survey, the rural youth at large were in a precarious situation. While some had opted not to work, and a few were still searching, many were at the mercy of the dwindling labor market, waiting in uncertainty.

CHAPTER SEVEN
Summary and Conclusions

The main aim of the present study was to understand the educational experiences of young people in government institutions located in a rural area in Sikkim and how that, along with other influences, shape their future trajectories. The main assumption on which the study was built was that the urban-centric development in Sikkim (as elsewhere) positioned the rural young people at the margins (Chapter Two and Three). The rural-urban divide is manifested in the way growth of modern education has taken place in Sikkim. The schools and educational institutions that cater to rural population, especially those from the lower social classes, are oriented largely towards providing access, with low emphasis on quality (Chapter Three). These youth, thus, face several disadvantages in terms of educational experiences and outcomes (Chapter Four and Five).

The main findings of the study point at the salience of social class (family income, education. and occupation) in the translation of student aspirations into actual outcomes (Chapter Six). Although many of the young participants in the study articulated that education was important and held high aspirations for higher education and work, only a handful of the students in the study were able to achieve or move closer to the educational and the occupational goals they had set earlier in the study. Those who could do so were from relatively more stable income families from the rural lower middle class, especially low professional, and small business families. For majority of the participants, most of whom belonged to families with marginal incomes and low levels of parental education, the gap between their aspirations and attainment was quite wide. With the widening of access to higher education in Sikkim, while many could move into college after school, the increasing participation in higher education, however, has led to credential inflation. This has made it harder for the college-educated to get viable employment. Dominant notions about the desirability of government jobs and various socio-cultural preferences and norms were important influences on both aspiration making and attainment of the young people.

This chapter will first present a summary of the various influences on the formation of educational and occupational aspirations of school and college students selected for the study. Then we shall look at the eventual outcomes. The chapter will also highlight the way the young people employed their agencies to stay afloat despite the uncertainty that surrounded their transitions into adulthood. Finally, it will contextualize the main themes and findings within the broader processes of change as it has played out in the specific context of Sikkim.

Raising Student Aspirations in School and College: Contradictions and Ambiguities

If we try to locate the two main sites of the study, the School (GSR) and the College (GCR) within the larger terrain of education in Sikkim, both institutions are, in a way, located at the margins. Students in these institutions were doubly disadvantaged in being state-funded institutions located in a rural area. Although the state has focused on expanding access to schooling and higher education in Sikkim in the past three decades, lack of resources, gaps in proper planning, and inefficiency in implementation and monitoring of the various educational schemes have led to government education in Sikkim becoming, what Levinson and Holland call, a "mere caricature of Western systems" (1996, p. 17). This is more the case with educational institutions located in the rural areas. Thus, both GSR and GCR were faced with the challenge of aligning the "meritocratic promise of modern education" (Hall, 2013, p. 169) with the ground level difficulties of being marginally located government institutions. In other words, both institutions were plagued by various issues relating to low funding, poor infrastructure, and limited resources. The School and the College also faced the task of catering to students who were transitioning on to higher education or work. It did not help the teachers in both the institutions that many of the students came in with low academic skills. Despite these limitations, the School and the College were places where positive future aspirations and orientations were actively encouraged. Career counselling sessions were organized by the administration. Teachers often mentored the more forthcoming students, giving them career and educational advice. At the same time, both the institutions, in their own ways, lacked the means to create more meaningful and better learning experiences for their students. The resultant consequence was that the "ethos" (Sarangapani, 2003) of the school and the college was strongly defined by the ritualism of doing education. The focus in both institutions was about ensuring the routine work of conducting classes, maintain discipline and decorum, and holding various events went on uninterrupted but there was no substantial effort at addressing the teaching and learning difficulties faced by the teachers and the students (see Chapter Four and Five).

The findings of the study show how it is difficult for educational institutions at the margins to substantially make a difference in the lives of the students they cater to. Both the School and the College lacked the requirements to provide the students, most of whom had low academic capabilities, with a vibrant learning environment. This mismatch between what the institutions hoped to achieve and what they could provide to the young people was, in a way, reflected in the students' attitudes as well. As earlier stated, the students generally held high regard for education and articulated high educational (and occupational) goals, however,

many of them were uncertain about how they could translate their aspirations into actual outcomes. The educational experience provided in both GSR and GCR were mostly centered on making students understand the importance of education in their lives, but without any substantial intervention, majority of the students were likely to hold hollow aspirations with little knowledge of converting these aspirations into "capabilities" (Sen, 1987/1999; Hart, 2012/2014). Moreover, by constructing hierarchies between the students of varying abilities and subject choices (in the school) and by promoting a lackadaisical attitude to teaching and student evaluation (in the college), the institutions created in the students doubts about their academic competency levels and further educational pathways beneath a thin veneer of high aspirations.

As mentioned in the earlier chapters, compared to the school, the college was a more marginal institution, especially with regard to its students' social locations and subject choices. In the follow-up study (2019-20), a small minority of the school students, especially those coming from the science and the commerce streams, were able to go out of Sikkim for further education and take up jobs as higher professionals, such as engineers, doctors, and business executives. From the college sample, the highest jobs the students were engaged in were that of low professionals (mostly as school teachers). This difference between the School and the College sample, of course, was influenced by the course options available in the College which was an arts degree college. The aspirations in the College were also shaped by the local hierarchy of occupations wherein teaching was placed among the most desirable options. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the fact that rural higher educational institutions like the GCR with their limited infrastructure, low resources, and lack of course options, had quite a relatively moderate influence on student upward mobility through education. A lot depended on the participants' social class background and the ability of their families to mobilize resources when needed. As was the case, despite providing access, state-funded higher education was often an intervention that came too late and too little, making it difficult for most students to transcend their academic difficulties and social locations towards further education and secure employment.

Decision Making within the Family: Class and Other Considerations

Majority of the students from both the school and the college had parents with low levels of academic attainment. In most cases, the students were the first generation to pursue higher education in the family. Despite this, the parents greatly valued education and regarded it as the most important means to a "secure" and "respectable" future for their children. Parental

participation in their children's education, however, was selective. When it came to curricular matters, parents were usually not involved. This was largely because they did not have the required intellectual resources that were necessary to support their children in making decisions with respect to their studies. The parents, even those who belonged to the lower-middle class, said that they did not interfere with issues such as choice of subjects or what courses their children wanted to pursue further. Most parents also could not help their children with their academic work. The students were largely left on their own to in the academic and curricular matters. This contrasts with the kind of "intensive parenting" strategies seen among the urban middle classes in India (see Kaur, 2021; Sancho, 2013).

Nevertheless, more than the educational institutions or peer circles, the family was still the key space where the young people's educational futures were decided. As argued in Chapter Four, the family was the site where there was a cooling down of the young people's "idealistic aspirations" into more "realistic" ones (Kintrea et al., 2011, St. Clair et al., 2013) or "doxic" into "habituated" aspirations (Zipin et al., 2013). The social class background was certainly a major factor in influencing how the aspirations of both school and college students were concretized. The interesting theme that emerged from the study was the way individual family dynamics lessened or exaggerated the effect of class, gender, and other identities. Looking at the families of the young people under study, factors such as size of the family, total number of dependents, sibling order, presence (or absence) of educated or employed older siblings, kinship and social networks, various family exigencies, and parental attitudes, expectations, and anxieties all placed either possibilities or constraints on the students' plans. Parents and guardians could also, taking into consideration the academic capability of their children, either halt or expedite their children's transition into work at times regardless of the financial situation within families. Laureau (1997), while asserting the importance of cultural capital on parental participation, however, argues that "the behaviour of parents" is "not fully determined by their social location" (p. 714). The family, thus, was the site where the calculations that decided where one could go to study and for how long, and what kinds of jobs one could work towards and where, were made. These calculations were not always based on straight forward deductions. In other words, there was an intersection of many factors that the families took into consideration. As Ball et al. put it, "the choreography of decision making within families" was indeed "complicated" (2000:144).

Gender Constraints

Both the female and the male students held high aspirations for education as well as for work. There were, however, constraints placed by gender on their choices and decision making. This was revealed more in parent interviews than in student's narratives. Although explicitly, parents held the education of both sons and daughters as equally important, certain patriarchal values colored their ideas about their children's possible futures. Parents tended to have gendered expectations and perceptions from their children. While there were changing notions of how daughters were more 'dependable' than sons, the latter were generally expected to be the breadwinners. There were exceptions, but these were usually in the case of marginal income families with only daughters.

There were constraints on the physical mobility of the female students. Parental anxieties about sending daughters out of the state to study was quite high. Media crime stories highlighting the lack of women safety in larger cities and towns of India dominated the imagination of the parents. The parents, even those with stable incomes, were unsure about taking the risk of sending their daughters away from home. Many parents also quoted higher economic costs of sending daughters out to study as compared to sons. They felt that daughters, more than sons, required higher living costs since ensuring secure accommodation, travel and other miscellaneous facilities were more important in the case of women.

Conservative values of the socio-cultural milieu were also a major concern for the female students. Female students saw great value in education as something that would bring them financial independence, autonomy, and thereby greater gender parity in their future relationships. The girls, however, were also concerned by the stereotyped ideas about educated women. Overly educated and independent women were not perceived favorably. The girls, thus, had to walk the thin line balancing their modern aspirations with the patriarchal norms and values. They wanted to study further but not "too much" (Chopra, 2005, p. 301; Froerer, 2011, 2012). Women students wanted to become financially independent. but did not want to earn more than their future spouses. Therefore, despite nurturing high aspirations, majority of the female students tailored their horizons according to the perceived cultural expectations. The fact that majority of the students (both male and female) were low academic performers, however, made the limiting of their aspirations due to either patriarchal norms or other external forces far easier than it would have been if they were high achievers.

Gender was an important factor in the translation of the student aspirations into actual outcomes. The 2019-20 survey shows that the highest gap between the initial aspirations and attainment was in the case of students from the lower social classes and who were largely female. These two categories were mostly concentrated in the lower attainment categories (of school leavers, undergraduates, and unemployed) in terms of both education and occupation (Chapter Six). Gender also interacted with social class to give surprising outcomes. For instance, as argued in Chapter Six, female students from few families with higher stocks of capital had high levels of achievement, for the rest, it was either withdrawing from work after marriage or being compelled to work in more insecure forms of employment. Among the latter, staying unemployed or working in low-paid jobs can also be seen as a manifestation of the various kinds of patriarchies. While the option not to work was available to the participants from relatively stable income families, for those whose parents were marginal workers, daughters (and sons as well) were expected to join work and contribute to the family income as early as possible.

Place, Identities and Expectations

In Chapter Two, I have highlighted the complexities of "Sikkimese" (or the domiciled) and "non-Sikkimese" (or the non-domiciled) identities owing to the politico-historical context of the place and the varying migration timelines of the numerous ethnic groups in Sikkim. The study being in a rural area bordering West Bengal presented the dynamics between domiciled and non-domiciled identities. Of course, the "Sikkimese" is not a homogenous category. It consists of the triad comprising the older inhabitants coming from the Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali ethnic groups. While there are certainly distinct socio-cultural norms and values between (and within) the above three ethnic groups that may have a bearing on youth aspirations, the main thrust of the study being the exploration of future possibilities, the domiciled versus non-domiciled identities was more a significant influence as it involved differential access to various educational and employment opportunities for the young people.

The concept of "ethnic capital" explored by Modood (2004) and Shah et al. (2010) refers to shared "norms and values related to education and careers" possessed by certain ethnic groups that emphasize high education and career aspirations (Shah et al., 2010: 1123). The research findings revealed that the non-local or non-domiciled Sikkimese youth, in the absence of their access to state scholarships for higher education, too possessed a kind of "ethnic capital" that propelled them to hold high aspirations. This was especially true in the

case of the Bihari and Marwari students who were generally high academic performers in school. Their educational pathways led them to higher educational institutions outside the state which meant that they needed to compete at the national level for college admissions. They also held high career aspirations, often aiming for high professional jobs. When it came to their educational and occupational attainment, for most of them, the gap between their aspirations and attainment was lower compared to their "Sikkimese" counterparts. These ethnic groups owned small businesses in Rhenock and possessed more economic capital compared to the other occupational groups. They also mobilized their ethnic capital by reaching out to family, kinship and caste and social networks outside the state to chart out possible educational and employment destinations for their children.

The "Sikkimese" students, on the other hand, possessed the "home" advantage. The meritorious among them could avail the state-quotas or scholarships for higher education outside the state especially for technical and professional courses. Also, with the opening of various government degree colleges, even low performers and those coming from marginal income families could access higher education in the general courses inside Sikkim. These students also had the post-education pathway into state government jobs which was not available to the "non-Sikkimese". Thus, there was a certain degree of cushioning that was conferred on domiciled Sikkimese students. On the flipside, "being Sikkimese" also posed certain constraints on the students as their aspirations had to be curtailed in accordance with the parental and socio-cultural expectations. The Sikkimese identity appeared to come with the baggage of having their employment destination fixed. Majority of them were expected to work inside Sikkim and preferably in the public sector. This led many of the students to form moderate aspirations that fitted in with the demands of the local employment situation. Also, due to the scarcity of viable government employment, many in the follow-up survey were under-employed, often working government jobs incommensurate to their educational qualification (Chapter Six).

The difference between the trajectories of the Marwari and Bihari students on one hand and the domiciled Sikkimese students on the other suggests similarities with the difference drawn by Froerer (2011) between Christian and Hindu *adivasi* youth in Chattisgarh (discussed in Chapter One). To reiterate the findings of Froerer's study, the lack of landed property, the "historical willingness" to migrate for work and the social capital provided by the Church made it easier for the (Oraon) Christian youth to gain higher educational qualifications and migrate to urban areas looking for work. For the Hindu *adivasi* youth, the rootedness to the village due to land ownership and lack of social capital and

economic resources to gain viable employment outside limited their educational acquisition as well as spatial mobility.

While the students from the business communities and those from Sikkim enjoyed a certain degree of leverage, the most marginalized were the students coming from the surrounding villages of West Bengal, most of whom came from marginal income families. Without the "ethnic" and social and economic capital possessed by the Marwari and Bihari business families or the backing of the state enjoyed by the local Sikkimese students, these students had to contend with the insecurities of both their educational and employment pathways. Majority of these students often had to cut their educational pathways short in search of employment, and work in insecure, private sector jobs in Sikkim, West Bengal or outside.

Youth Agency and Strategies

The young participants, in their responses, stressed on their individuality and rarely attributed the role of others – family, teachers or peer group – in their decision-making process (Chapter Four and Five). The flipside of this assertion was that the students' academic inadequacies and low attainment was viewed as stemming from personal shortcomings (see Furlong and Cartmel, 1997/2007). Although the students assumed a high degree of autonomy over the making of their choices and decisions, these choices and decision were seen to be constrained by various structural factors of class, gender, ethnicity, place, and employment structure. Evans' (2002) concept of "bounded agency" or agency "as a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures" (p. 262), can provide a way to capture the interaction between the young people's subjectivities and the structural realities that surrounded them.

The students, in both the School and the College, were also seen to negotiate between the making of individualistic self-identity with the more "traditional" communitarian ones. Punch (2002: 130), has proposed the adoption of the concepts of "interdependence" and "negotiated interdependence" which describes the balancing of "family demands and personal ambitions" and how young people "integrate the different contexts of their lives at school, home and work" in the decisions that they make. Similarly, Dyson (2014) in her study of young people and work in Uttarkhand, India, critiques the equation of youth agency with an assertion of their independence. Dyson (2014) argues that fulfilling traditional roles and obligations, and building social relationships with their families, kin members, and community are essential to the development of youth subjectivity and status within such

communities. This was done “in order to acquire a sense of agency” (2014, p. 6) and be recognized as “competent young people” (p. 12). Correspondingly, in-depth narratives of the young participants in this study illustrate the way they imbue their future possibilities with a sense of social responsibility often giving *moral meanings* (Baker, 2016) to their aspirations that resonate with the values of the communitarian social context they belonged to (Chapter Four and Five). The way students balanced modern individualistic orientations with collectivist socio-cultural expectations can be seen as an example of how students in the study were actively constructing their aspirations and aligning them over time with their social environment. I had discussed in Chapter Five that, for the college students, the main question on their minds was how wide their aspirational horizons could stretch given the limitations posed by class, gender, family, and associated socio-cultural expectations. No doubt they believed in the possibilities that education opened, but ‘being educated’ also had to merge with the local expectations of humility, altruism, and cooperation.

The bounded agency of the young people in the study is also quite perceptible in their alignment of the high parental and societal regard for government jobs with their perceived and actual level of competency and skills. Roder (2017) found a similar desirability of government employment among the Bhutanese educated youth. Roder’s young people were seen to be “waiting” (Jeffrey, 2010) on higher level administrative jobs with the government and they disregarded other forms of occupation, such as teaching, as being too labour intensive with little material and social returns. In Sikkim, Roder’s findings may be true for the more privileged urban middle classes. The young people in my study were from rural lower middle and lower classes. They were not looking for positions at higher levels in the public administration. Despite their “idealistic” aspirations, most of them were quite aware of the constraints posed by their level of academic competency. They often referred to themselves as being ‘backward’ (See Chapter Four and Five) compared to their counterparts from urban areas. These students were looking for government jobs but were open to the middle and even lower-level office jobs. With the local hierarchy of occupations, teaching, unlike for Roder’s youth (2017), was a highly aspired profession among the students in my study.

In terms of mobility strategies, the students were quite aware of the “folk theories of making it” (Ogbu, 1978; Ogbu & Simons, 1998). Employment strategies involved the cultivation of social capital (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). Students often highlighted the importance of acquiring social connections through political participation. Some of the students were considering joining politics if their plans did not fall in place in the future. One

of them nonchalantly spoke about his intention to join politics just for the sake of cultivating the required networks to get employment (Chapter Five). Also, the students' trajectories after school and college do show that a sizable number of them were still "waiting" in educational institutions, in temporary jobs, in self-employment and in unemployment for the right opportunity to come by. Although this picture looks bleak, especially for those from marginal social backgrounds, the various forms of waiting and the meanings the young people are constructing will be able to elucidate the complex strategies they have in mind. That, however, is beyond the scope of the present study. Nevertheless, protests and rallies by the unemployed and those working in insecure jobs at the opportune time have been prominent in the political landscape of Sikkim (Chapter Six). The passivity involved in waiting could, thus, be reinterpreted as a form of strategy that emerges out of a methodical understanding of the local political context.

A Changing Landscape: New Marginalities and Peripheries

It has been argued that the neoliberal economic turn that has taken place in India since the 1990s has chiefly benefitted the upper sections of the middle classes, especially those living in the metropolitan cities (Fernandes, 2006; Gupta, 2009). This section of the population is seen as a reference group for those from the lower-middle and lower sections of Indian society (see Jeffrey, 2010). However, focusing on the broad patterns of change in Indian society is as important as the recognition of intricacies put forth by the multiplicity of both spatial and temporal realities in various parts of India. Sikkim, a small Himalayan state, presents a unique facet of Indian society which, although not insulated from the structures of the larger politico-economic developments in the country, highlights a distinctive pattern of change. Also, the place due to its history of late incorporation with the Indian Union has had to rapidly catch up with the rest of the country in terms of 'development' and 'modernity'. Hence, the distinctiveness of Sikkim mainly arises from its historical trajectory of moving on from a theocratic state to a protectorate one (of British India and later of Independent India) and then finally merging with India in the year 1975 (Chapter Two).

Despite Sikkim's history, the merger with India was followed by a relatively smooth assimilation into the larger national framework and a peaceful political climate. Although the ethno-political scene within the state is very complicated and the various issues pertaining to it have the tendency to surface from time to time, the larger discourses of democratization, modernisation and 'development' have dominated the political and the public imagination to a great degree. This push for rapid economic growth and discourses of democracy and social

justice have resulted in some drastic changes in the traditional stratification structure of Sikkimese society, that mainly comprised of the landowning and the laboring classes. Post-merger, there was the rise of what can be termed the middle class or the "new class" (Dutta, 1991) in Sikkim. This "new" class comprised of the early educated and the politically astute, who benefitted from the rapid modernisation process that marked the two decades following the merger.

The developmental model of Sikkim was also marked by its urban centric emphasis. Gangtok, the capital town, became the center of most of the developmental activities and emerged as the preferred destination for work, education, and other facilities for the more affluent and the upwardly mobile sections of society. The resultant rural to urban migration caused by the metrocentric model of development led to the small provincial towns and villages being inhabited by what I refer to as the lower-middle and lower classes of Sikkim. These rural social classes, thus, comprise those who have been 'left behind' in the earlier phase of modernisation in Sikkim. The upwardly mobile urbanites, who were absent in spaces like Rhenock, to a large extent, define the idea of success and aspirational horizons for the rural residents. Matthew, in her study of Dalit mothers' aspirations for their children in Kerala, writes, "As the present and the past flowed into each other and time shrunk, however, mothers became obsessively hopeful" (2017, p. 113). Taking Matthew's layering of the past and the present in the formation of aspirational horizons into the context of my study, the rural families in Sikkim can also be seen as being preoccupied by the past narratives of "success" and "mobility" of their urban-bound, upwardly mobile relatives, neighbors, and community members. The aspirational horizons that emerge are projected on to their children for whom access to education has opened widely with the state actively promoting school participation and expansion of higher education. This, however, comes at a time of increasing scarcity of jobs for the educated.

Vigh (2009) describes that the concept of "social navigation" as "motion within motion" implies movement of people within a non-static field. He explains, "the way people and groups move in their social environments as well as of the constant configuration of the social environments themselves" (p. 433). The main question that this study raises is: if the navigational skills of the rural people in Sikkim is largely based on the past strategies of accumulation and mobility, what happens when the "social environment" has undergone rapid changes? The persistence of the dominant discourse that emphasizes the value of government employment and the role of the state in perpetuating the same is very crucial to

understand why people at the margins are still negotiating and navigating the terrain of employment and education reminiscent of the past.

With mass participation of the young people in education, there is a tapering of aspirational horizons towards employment within the public sector. Upadhya and Chowdhury (2022) while exploring the role of skill development centers in Bangalore in facilitating the movement of rural youth into urban, lower-level jobs in the new service economy found that many were unwilling to work in insecure, low-paid work offered to them in the cities. Instead, despite being aware of the difficulties of entry into public sector jobs, many still held on to their aspiration of getting a "government job." In Sikkim, the high desire for government jobs is a very complex issue stemming from various factors (see Chapter Two for more detailed discussion). Sikkim being a small, land-locked state located in a mountainous terrain has limited options for the development of large-scale economic activities, whether in manufacturing or in agriculture. Entrepreneurship and business have been the monopoly of the Marwari and Bihari business communities who have established profitable enterprises largely due to their access to networks outside the state. The newly established private pharmaceutical companies, hydel power projects, and tourism industry do offer employment opportunities, but majority of the young people from Sikkim lack the credentials and the skills to occupy well-paid positions within these establishments. Hence, in a way, young people largely turn towards public sector for employment opportunities. Besides the structural factors, the high desire for government jobs is also rooted in the popular social imagination. The identity of "being Sikkimese" is deeply intertwined with the idea of working and living inside Sikkim.[106] As the participants in my study show, despite the individualist notions imported by modernizing forces, there is still a high regard among both the older and the younger generation for collectivism and living within a thick web of social relationships and obligations (Chapter Four and Five). Working in government jobs inside Sikkim seems to fit in with the instrumental as well as the social expectations for majority of the young people.

The role of the state is also significant. Although there has been some effort on the part of the government to open new avenues of employment, the growing desire for government jobs among the people had led to ruling political parties adopting the more

[106] The decreasing family size and increasing nuclearization of the family structure has also led to strong emphasis placed by parents on their children to work inside Sikkim (Chapter Two).

populist strategies of sustaining the popular aspirations by creating an entire sector of casual workers within the public sector with assurances of regularization in the future (Chapter Six).

What emerges from all the foregoing discussion is the formation of a parallel modernity for those at the margins characterized by relative deprivation. It has all the trappings the modern world has to offer but with a difference. There is opening of access to school and higher education institutions that, at face value, seem to encourage meritocracy and high aspirations among students but without much emphasis on the latter acquiring the required skills or knowledge to be able to transform those aspirations into actual outcomes. There is upward social mobility of the educated young people but only in terms of moving on to white collar jobs from the manual and the agricultural work done by their parents. Nonetheless, these jobs that the young people occupy are at the lower level with insecure terms of employment entailing long periods of "waiting" (Jeffery, 2010). In a context of rapid change, there has been many societal shifts. These changes aimed at democratization of society and egalitarianism have contradictorily maintained and even widened the gap between the privileged and the under-privileged. Coming back to Vigh's (2009) conception of "motion within motion," the study shows that for those at the margins, as soon as they move closer to the center, the center shifts further from them. Despite the perfunctory interventions by the policy makers to bring them closer to core, they still find themselves at the periphery of the new social arrangement.

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