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Title

Everyday Prefiguration: Youth Social Action in North India

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Introduction

There is a consensus across a number of disciplines, including human geography, that the 2000s witnessed a resurgence of what is often termed 'prefigurative politics' – activity in which people channel political effort into practicing the forms, relations, and ideas that constitute the political goal (Boggs 1977). Notable examples include Occupy, the urban squatters' movements, and the World Social Forum. Geographers have made important contributions to the emerging field of prefigurative politics. Prominent examples include efforts to map the spatial imaginaries underpinning anarchist prefigurative action (Gordon 2012; Springer 2014), investigation of the historical geography of European squatter settlements as models of oppositional urbanism (Vasudevan 2015a; 2015b), and feminist research on urban activism (Klodaswky et al. 2013).

The abiding themes in this literature are of activists engaging in an intensive effort to build 'counter spaces' - such as urban camps (Graeber 2013) or homeplaces (Lin et al. 2016). Recent literature also focuses a great deal on the specific manner in which participants in prefigurative politics seek to coordinate their efforts across space and time, especially through the use of digital media (e.g. Carroll 2015), and develop specific geographical narratives to lend coherence to their efforts (Schneider 2013). Research on prefigurative politics therefore informs, and is informed by, wider literatures within geography on everyday activism (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010), urban social movements (McFarlane 2009), and transnational political mobilisation and cosmopolitanism (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003).

Notwithstanding the vitality of the literature on prefigurative politics and its significance for human geography, however, scholars have tended to concentrate on a subset of forms of prefigurative politics. The main focus of research on prefigurative politics has been urban (but see Ward 1976). Moreover, scholars have largely concentrated on actions that operate

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through named institutions and derive their power from the visible difference from surrounding practice–such as squatters' camps, environmental communes, and anarchist demonstrations–to the relative neglect of less ostentatious, embedded forms of prefiguration (for important exceptions see Ward 1976; Gorostiza et al. 2013; Franks 2014). Through discussing a case study of everyday prefiguration in a village in north India, this paper seeks to introduce a broad audience to the field of geographies of contemporary prefigurative politics (see also Vasudevan 2015a). We provide a counterpoint to some of the dominant themes of existing geographical and interdisciplinary work on prefiguration. We engage with the classic questions of prefigurative politics around the character and effectiveness of such action, but from the point of view of a rural location and with reference to everyday acts.

Our focus on prefigurative action outside formal institutions and in a rural setting offers three key geographical insights. First, we suggest that prefigurative action may achieve its form not only through people occupying or creating a physical space or institutional presence–a prominent theme in the existing literature–but rather through people building stronger social networks and links within their community, a theme present in much early anarchist literature on prefiguration (see especially Landauer 1978 [1911]). A key aspect of this youth action in our research area is that it is often migrants who return periodically to rural areas, in addition to young people based in the village, who are important prefigurative actors.

Second, through focusing especially on migrants, we address a debate within studies of prefigurative politics on how participants in such politics manage the problems associated with their spatial dispersal and the need to disseminate messages across space and through time. We suggest that migrant young people engaged in prefigurative action in Bemni, a village in north India, addressed the difficulties attached to coordinating prefiguration action across space and time by cultivating close links with each other and with youth who remained in the village.

Third, we highlight the central importance in a north Indian context of a narrative of 'atmosphere' (*mahaul* in Hindi) in shaping prefigurative action (Stewart 2011). This narrative focused on how capitalist development was threatening the village's ambiance. Young people in Bemni seek to build a better 'mahaul' by acting as role models within the village.

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The remainder of the paper is divided into eight sections. First, we outline current debates on prefigurative politics. Second, we argue for a new approach to prefigurative politics that looks beyond the movements usually studied. Third, we introduce our field site - Bemni, Uttarkhand – and, fourth, the particular population with whom we worked and our methodology. The next three sections deal with three different subsets of migrant youth. In the conclusion we link our analysis to wider debates.

Prefigurative politics

Scholars commonly trace the idea of prefigurative politics to the anarchist writing of Gustav Landauer (1978 [1911]), Mikhail Bakunin (1990 [1873]), Emma Goldman (2012 [1910]), and Peter Kropotkin (2002 [1898]). These prominent authors advocated the channelling of political energy into enacting desired change within the form of a movement itself. They commonly contrasted this means-ends alignment to some brands of Marxism, where it was imagined that adherents must submit to party discipline now in order to realise an egalitarian future. The anarchist Landauer (1978 [1911]), for example, argued powerfully for a political project rooted in the cultivation of relationships of mutuality within self-managed cooperative ventures. Change, in this optic, occurs incrementally rather than through revolution: 'building a new world in the shell of the old.'

Notwithstanding the force and influence of anarchist writing, it was not until the 1970s that the term 'prefigurative politics' itself was coined. Carl Boggs (1977: 361) used the phrase to refer to the embodiment within the ongoing practice of a political action "of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal" (see also Breines 1989). There has been a noticeable upsurge of prefigurative action in this sense since the mid-1990s. This has been manifest in the rise of the World Social Forum (Fominaya 2010), Occupy Movement (Schneider 2013; Ven de Sande 2015), various facets of the collection of uprisings and assertions known as 'the Arab Spring' in North Africa and the Middle East (see Tadros 2015). It is also evident in a wide variety of other forms of political assertion during recent years, including the squatters' movements (Vasudevan 2015b), environmental activism (Mason 2014), community garden initiatives (Guerlin and Campbell 2016), community-based recovery groups (Beckwith et al. 2016), alternative economies (White and Williams 2012), and internet-based political struggle (Sancho 2014). The causes of the upsurge in prefigurative politics are complex but often relate to

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dissatisfaction with many established modes of political organising–for example through political parties–and the rapid progress of the communications revolution of the twenty-first century, which has offered activists new opportunities to model and broadcast political messages.

Much of the literature on prefigurative politics of the Twentieth Century and Twenty-First centuries has focused on urban, organised political forms. It is important to enter some caveats, however. There is a strand of work that examines everyday, including rural, prefigurative action, including Ward's (1976) analysis of sustainable rural communities, Pickerill and Maxey's (2009) research on eco-housing, and Routledge's (2003) work on grassroots globalization networks, for example. Nevertheless, existing commentary on prefigurative action has tended to focus on organised urban activism and epochal movements, reflecting in part the prominence of major movements in the 2000s and 2010s.

The issue of the effectiveness of prefigurative politics is prominent in the literature. Some commentators have argued that prefigurative politics is indulgent in prioritising modelling society over the exigencies of a shifting political context or preventing the emergence of new agendas as political practices evolve (De Smet 2014). Such critiques include an early Marxist literature that countered the enthusiasm for prefigurative politics in the 1960s (see Lipset and Altbach 1969; Breines 1989) as well as a more recent critical literature on Occupy and the World Social Forum (see De Smet 2014; cf Graeber 2013).

Those defending the value of prefigurative action–again, typically focusing on urban, organised politics–commonly point out that prefigurative politicians prioritise experimentation rather than a fixed message and political repertoire (Ince 2010; Springer 2014). They also assert that in practice those involved in prefigurative action usually blend a commitment to 'being the change' with non-prefigurative politicking. Indeed, some scholars have distinguished between a 'hard prefiguration' where channelling energy into aligning social practices with a desired end takes precedence over all other considerations, and a more effective 'soft prefiguration' in which the desire to enact change is routinely placed in conversation with other exigencies (see Maeckelburgh 2011). In addition, defenders of prefigurative action sometimes argue that the act of 'being the change'–and the connected defiance of a surrounding political culture–may yield psychological gains for the individuals involved, contribute to community building within a set of marginalised

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protesters, or have other long-term political benefits, for example as a marker of what is possible (Breines 1989; see Maeckelburgh 2011).

A key point emerging from commentaries on the recent upsurge of prefigurative politics is that political actions and institutions can be more or less prefigurative. At one end of the spectrum are political organisations that concentrate on the demonstration effect to the exclusion of other considerations. At the other end of the spectrum, are political organisations whose tactics and strategies bear no relation to desired ends or even decisively diverge from the change that is sought. As Fominaya (2010) has pointed out in her study of the World Social Forum in Spain, and as Schneider (2013) also notes in his auto-ethnography of the Occupy Movement, the issue of where a set of people involved in a movement should sit on this continuum and how this might change through time is often a topic of live debate (see also Halvorsen 2017).

In addition to debating its effectiveness, scholars have begun to focus on the geographies of prefigurative politics. It is possible to distil three main points from this scholarship. First, prefigurative politics often involves the creation of specific discrete settings in which people model the vision they have of the future. The Occupy Movement is a notable example, the camps that emerged being comprised of a diverse set of social practices including democratic debates, yoga classes, the sharing of food, and impromptu educational lectures (see Halvorsen 2017). Similarly, in his work on traditions of European squatting, Vasudevan (2015b) writes of squatter settlements as complex 'infrastructures' that involved participants in constant efforts to materialise the social relationships that they strove to enact. This emphasis on working energetically within distinct spaces is evident, too, in research on school and university seizures in Brazil (see McCowan 2010). In this case, students occupied and remade their institutions, repurposing classrooms and lecture halls to reflect their vision of how education should take place.

Second, scholars have discussed the complicated forms of spatial coordination associated with prefigurative action. It is difficult to agree upon and then develop over time a single, coherent vision of a better world. It is often still more difficult to disseminate this vision across wide areas and in a durable way. Such coordination problems are not specific to prefigurative politics, but the emphasis within prefigurative action on maintaining and advertising particular mode of social practice and social relations often makes this form of action especially difficult to manage across space. For example, Carroll (2015) draws

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attention to the difficulties that members of the Transnational Alternative Policy Groups (TAPGs) encountered in managing their political practices across national boundaries. Carroll argues that TAPGs activists addressed these coordination problems through use of the internet and digital technologies, a theme also developed by Sancho (2014) on insurgencies emerging out of the Global Justice Movement.

Third, running through accounts of the geography of prefigurative activism is an emphasis on the production of specific notions of space and scale – for example the valorisation of ideas of home, locality, the neighbourhood, and the city (Day 2005; Lin et al. 2016). This is an especially strong focus of Lin et al.s (2016) study of 'radical homeplaces' in the USA which seek to provide a basis for improving women's reproductive health.

Rethinking prefigurative politics and its geographies

Notwithstanding the richness of the literature on prefigurative politics and geographies of prefiguration, there is a tendency in scholarly literature and wider commentaries to confuse the basic elements of prefiguration with its manifestation in anarchist action or activity that models decentralised, democratic forms of practice. Prefiguration is the enacting in the present of an agent's goals with a view to the generalisation of that action, and 'prefigurative politics' is a label applied to movements or actions in which this tendency is predominant. Prefigurative politics can therefore be used to describe deeply reactionary movements, such as the National Socialist Party in Germany in the 1930s or Golden Dawn in Greece, as well as environmental and social campaigns. It can be applied outside institutional contexts as well as within them, as for example where individuals disconnected from wider political organisations seek to change the world through personal action oriented around "being the change". Moreover, prefiguration need not be connected to urban space. The tactic of 'being the change' can be prosecuted in rural and remote locations, a point that has been developed in the existing literature (e.g. Ward 1976; Pickerill and Maxey 2009), but remains a minor theme.

Delinking prefiguration from its current association with particular types of visible urban social mobilisation offers a basis for creating a wider interdisciplinary and also geographical field of study on 'prefigurative politics'. This would examine why and in what form prefigurative politics becomes evident, its efficacy, and its geographies.

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We develop this approach in this paper through providing a case study of everyday prefiguration in a village in rural India. We argue that prefigurative politics in Bemni, a village in Uttarakhand, India, is typically of an everyday nature. In this specific context young people who had migrated outside the village, but who returned to Bemni periodically, were especially involved in prefigurative politics in the period between 2012 and 2015. The prefigurative action of these migrant young people, who worked alongside youth based permanently in Bemni, was fairly effective in generating new ideas and a measure of social cohesiveness in the village, even as it also reflected aspects of caste and class inequality in the region.

The youth prefigurative action we describe did not happen in discrete settings and typically involved young people in embodied 'performances' aimed at non-dramatic, gradual change (cf Ince 2010). In particular, young people referred to their capacity to change the 'mahaul' (atmosphere) of Bemni through their action. Wider work in geography has stressed how the term 'atmosphere' can simultaneously connote aspects of a situation's affective, physical, and social ambiance (e.g. McCormack 2008; Ellis et al. 2013; Edensor 2015). Ellis et al (2013) also argues that atmosphere is an aspect of place that is partially and inconstantly apprehended. In an analogous manner, young people in Bemni used the term 'mahaul' to connote aspects of a village's infrastructural development, social ambiance, and affective feel simultaneously, and they argued that people required specific experience to be able to 'tuned' to the qualities of the village mahaul. Moreover, and again connecting with human geographic literature on how people comport themselves with respect to the question of 'atmosphere' (see Edensor 2015), youth migrants in Bemni used the idea that they are distinctively able to sense, create, and shape the 'mahaul' as a means of demonstrating their social standing.

Bemni, Uttarakhand: Research Site and Methodology

Uttarakhand (population 10.1 million in 2011) is a State in India that achieved rapid economic growth in the 2000s (Office of the Registrar General 2011). But 40% of the population lives in poverty - well above the all-India figure- and three-quarters of the population depend on agriculture.

Forests cover roughly 60 per cent of Uttarakhand (Office of the Registrar General 2011). Under the British, the colonial state appropriated forests, a trend that continued after

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Independence (Rangan 2000). Uttarakhandi anger at the degradation of forests led to the Chipko movement in the 1970s, which aimed to protect forests from logging contractors, and also informed a successful campaign for a separate State of Uttarakhand in the 1980s and 1990s (Mawdsley 1997).

As of 2011, approximately three-quarters of the population of Uttarakhand belonged to 'General Castes' (GCs, sometimes referred to as 'higher castes'), while 17 per cent belonged to Scheduled Castes (SCs) (Office of the Registrar General 2011). Caste status in the region correlates with access to assets, professional work, and social contacts (see Dyson 2006; 2008; 2010). Economic disparities are not highly pronounced, however. GCs are only marginally wealthier than SCs in rural areas (see Berreman 1963). The region has a strongly patriarchal social structure, and women's human development indices are well below those of men (Moller 2003; Klenk 2010).

The village of Bemni is located in Chamoli District at an altitude of about 2500 metres. Agriculture in the village is subsistence-oriented, and there has been a diminution of farming in Bemni since the early 2000s. The sale of land to government for road construction and climate change – which has adversely affected on agricultural production - led to a decline in total farmed area in Bemni of roughly 25 per cent between 2003 and 2012. At the same time, the decade following 2003 witnessed improvements in social services in Bemni. The Government built a road that connects the village to the local town and the village gained access to electricity and a telecommunications tower. The local secondary school extended classes to the ninth and tenth standard with consequent benefits in terms of people's educational status. In 2012, 87 per cent of men and 75 per cent of women aged sixteen to twenty-five had at least passed class eight, whereas only 58 per cent of men and 5 per cent of women aged thirty-six to forty-five had done so.

Young people were centrally important to the social character of the village. Until as recently as the early 1990s, villagers would be married at the age of roughly fifteen, thereby transitioning directly from 'childhood' (*bachpan*) to 'adulthood' (*bare*). Increased education, however, resulted in a sharp increase in the age of marriage. In 2014, the average age of marriage increased to approximately twenty-six for men, and twenty for women, introducing a period understood as 'youth'. Villagers also sometimes to refer to married people as 'youth' where they continue to pursue education.

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One of us worked for eighteen months in Bemni village in 2003 and 2004 conducting doctoral research on the topic of children's work. This paper draws almost entirely, however, on the fieldwork of both of the authors, who carried out a total of 12 months of ethnographic, qualitative research between 2012 and 2015 on young people and social change. This research included four months each in the village in 2012 and five month long visits in 2013, 2014 and 2015. Between 2012 and 2015 we carried out a total of 130 interviews with 70 young people (aged 18-30), including 25 of the 38 migrant youth who are discussed in this paper. This included conversations about young people's family, education, work, social activity, politics and attitudes to politics, the state, development and social change, and the interviews were typically carried out over several conversations and buttressed with periods spent participating in the lives of our informants. This research formed part of a wider project on the politics of youth in South Asia.

Migrant youth agents

There were several young people based permanently within Bemni who played political roles. These youth were especially important in addressing practical aspects of living in the village, for example in relation to access to education, access to healthcare, the disbursement of development resources, and resolution of conflicts. These youth perceived themselves as role models and sometimes referred explicitly to the importance of prefiguration as a strategy (see Jeffrey and Dyson 2016).

Nevertheless, since 2010 these Bemni-based youth have increasingly relied on a second 'set' of 18-30 year olds – 26 men and 12 women and all GC - who are based outside Bemni for some periods of the year but work as social and political agents in the village. It is this set of migrant youth agents who are at the centre of this paper.

Of the 38 who belonged to this set, 17 were based in Delhi, 7 in Dehra Dun, 10 in other north Indian urban centres and 4 in other parts of India. Twenty-eight of these 38 young people had fairly secure and reasonably well-paid jobs in government service (7) or private service (21). Of those in private service, most worked in sales, marketing, or ran small or medium-sized retail/service outlets. The migrant youth typically returned to Bemni when on leave, usually for between two and four weeks, two or three times a year.

The migrant youth agents had all worked in the village as children in the 1990s or 2000s. This work had involved collaborating in the harvesting of dry leaves or herding of cattle, for

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example (see Dyson 2014). During this period, the migrants had acquired a sense of the importance of cooperative village relations and shared working. In school they learnt to appreciate the importance of 'social service' (*samaj seva*) – ideals which resonated with the experience of cooperative action in the fields and forest.

A growing theme of our research over the period between 2012 and 2015 was of the energy and activity of these migrant youth, who had three advantages relative to their Bemni-based counterparts in terms of engaging in prefigurative activity. First, they possessed a better knowledge than did village-based youth of local cities and the functioning of government across Uttarakhand. Second, young people living partially or wholly outside Bemni usually had a broader social network that could be utilised in seeking to improve aspects of the village. Third, migrant youth typically had more time at their disposal when in Bemni than young people in the village, who were embroiled in work for the vast majority of the time. This is not to downplay the importance of village-based youth (Jeffrey and Dyson 2016), but to highlight a set of young people who seemed to be playing an increasingly significant role in rural social change.

The category of 'migrant youth' can, in turn, be divided into three subsets. First, there were young men who worked as mentors mainly in relation to social issues around education, health, and infrastructure – we label these men 'migrant mentors'. Sixteen of the 38 migrant youth belonged to this group and we interview 10 of them. Second, there were more conventionally 'political' prefigurative young people, who specialised in understanding aspects of local and regional political practice and were especially crucial exemplars for others in society. Nine of the migrants belonged to this group and we interviewed 7. We term these youth 'migrant activists', a phrase we heard them use themselves. Third, there were young women who worked self-consciously as role models for other young women – there were 12 such individuals and we interviewed 8 of them. All members of these subsets were GC, reflecting the difficulties that SCs faced in developing public roles.

Migrant mentors

An indicative picture of the prefiguration action of migrant mentors in Bemni can be gleaned from the example of Rampal. He was 28 in 2012 and lived in the Uttarakhand State capital of Dehra Dun. Rampal's wife continued to live in Bemni. His son was three years old

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and was also in the village. His seven-year-old daughter, however, lived with Rampal in Dehra Dun where she attended a private English-medium school.

Rampal had been educated up to Tenth Class in the village. At that point he dropped out of school to work as a dentist's assistant in Dehra Dun. After eight years in that work he returned to the village for a year and half to care for an ill relative. Rampal then moved back to Dehra Dun where he obtained a clerk's position at a monthly salary of Rs. 4,000 - roughly 100 UK pounds and equivalent to the earnings of a construction labourer in the village. "My life at that point was tough", he said.

His salary was hardly enough to make ends meet in the city. But Rampal steadily moved up the hierarchy of private service occupations. He enrolled in an IT course in the city that provided the basis for his running a distributorship for a multinational software firm. By 2014 he was earning Rs. 18,000 a month and considered himself part of the city's "lower middle class". He was adamant that he would return to live in Bemni in his forties.

Rampal visited the village roughly every three months and stayed there for between two and three weeks. During these trips, he advised and mentored younger children and campaigned to enhance facilities in the local school. He had a particular interest in improving the village infrastructure through organising work gangs who could engage in environmental improvement. He regularly encouraged other groups of villagers, including youth but also many other sections of Bemni society, to repair broken paths, fix water pipes, and dig out watercourses.

A sense of Rampal's action can be gleaned from his work repairing a section of a major trekking path that runs through the village. Storms had damaged the so-called 'Curzon trail' named after Lord Curzon, who is supposed to have plotted the route of the track as a means of encouraging trekking in the region. The damage was particularly bad close to Rampal's house and an inspection party of young men confirmed that the rain had completely obliterated a section of the track. Rampal gathered together fourteen young people from the village and, having identified two people among this group who would carry up food and make tea, he set to work with his gang.

The group worked for two days patching the track back together and trying to stabilise the surrounding slope. Rampal constantly gave advice, shouted encouragement and talked about the importance of the activity, which he frequently referred to as "noble work" (*nek kaam*). After 48 hours of toil, as well as laughter, the group could survey a largely perfect

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new path. Rampal emphasised that the work had three benefits. It improved the path. It showed others what can be possible through working together, and it also served in a small way to improve the overall 'atmosphere' - he used the Hindi word 'mahaul' - of the village. Rampal said:

I mean it improved the social environment by getting us all working together. But it also improved the natural environment, by repairing what had tumbled down and giving people access to the forest.

In these and other instances, Rampal worked closely alongside young people based solely in Bemni. These village-based youth were assisting their families and other households in the village with educational decisions, health emergencies, and efforts to acquire development resources from local government. Rampal could add value to the work of his village-based compatriots by providing information on outside dynamics, examples of strategies employed in other areas, and knowledge on long-run change in the region. Rampal refused to cultivate a persona as a leader. He said that the success of his projects depended on an appreciation of the distributed skill set in the village and the absence of any hierarchy within a group. He said, "We are a type of mentor, but we never talk or behave as such. I am not a leader."

Rampal was similar in major respects to nine other young men we interviewed in Bemni who worked outside the village and returned regularly to act as "migrant mentors". As in the forms of everyday prefigurative action discussed for example by Ward (1976) and Maxey and Pickerell (2009), migrant mentors sought to 'be the change' in relation to specific projects connected to the provision of key services. Like Rampal, migrant mentors tried to offer political guidance and advice on social issues in the village, especially in relation to education, infrastructure, health, work and development. Migrant mentors said that they engaged in such action because they felt committed to improving the village. They spoke of their love for Bemni and the surrounding Nandakini Valley. They also said that they hoped that their own future children would live in the village, and they envisaged retiring to Bemni themselves.

These young men argued that their work was 'political' because it entailed managing conflict in the village – for example between families and between people and local

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government officials – and because it entailed mobilising youth to work together, which often required prolonged effort. These men rejected party politics or voting as a means to achieve change and said that change has to come "from within" (*andar se*) through embodying a better way of being in the world and with others. One young man referred to this process as a type of 'chain' wherein he would work to create role models and thereby slowly spread what he viewed as 'good practice' within and beyond the village. In addition, young people such as Rampal tended to regard embodying a 'good attitude' as a type of victory in itself. This point connects their action to that of more organised prefigurative political forms, such as the Occupy Movement, where the intrinsic value of oppositional action was also stressed (see Schneider 2013).

The notion of improving the village's 'mahaul' acted as a crucial connecting thread in the activities of migrant mentors and in their discussions of why they participated in such action. Mahaul has no direct English translation, but most closely approximates the notion of 'atmosphere'. In Bemni, it was most commonly applied to villages in the local region - which were said to either possess a 'good mahaul' or 'bad mahaul'. Villagers commonly stressed that maintaining a reputation for being in a village with a 'good mahaul' was important, especially in terms of parents' efforts to find marriage partners for village youth. Villagers did not agree precisely on the criteria that could be applied to assess the quality of a village's mahaul, but migrant mentors tended to concur on three points. First, they agreed that a good mahaul was typically one in which people looked after each other, collaborated around work, and maintained cordial relations. Migrant mentors remembered their childhood in the village as one in which they had benefited from reciprocity in the process of work. They recalled a general ambiance of "give and take" (*len-den*). As in other contexts in which atmosphere has been discussed (see Ellis et al. 2013), this sense of an ambiance of cooperative relations was rarely acknowledged openly but operated instead at an only partially-conscious affective level. Second, migrant mentors maintained a good mahaul was one in which the key requirements of development (*vikaas*) were available: electricity, healthcare, and education. The issue of education was especially important; in many cases, young people compared the relatively strong 'educational ambiance' in cities with its absence in the village. Third, a good mahaul required that the physical structure of the village was robust and the surrounding jungle thriving and well managed.

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Migrant mentors worried that Bemni's absorption into wider networks of money and power was threatening the village's mahaul across these three areas. They cited rising individualism and environmental degradation as particular problems. A friend of Rampal's named Tejbir said:

We need to avoid the selfishness of the city. The thing to do is provide the village with the good elements of modern: a good road, an educated ambiance, while avoiding the city culture. We have to improve the village's atmosphere (mahaul).

Like the term 'atmosphere' studied by geographers in other contexts (see Stewart 2011; Ellis et al. 2013), people therefore used the word 'mahaul' as a way of summing the 'affective resonances' of a place. A good individual acting correctly and out of principle could, in the view of Rampal and his compatriots, act to improve or protect the 'mahaul' across the different areas of the social, developmental, and environmental.

Migrant mentors also emphasised that it was their status as migrants that was partly important in facilitating their activism and especially their capacity to appreciate Bemni's mahaul. They said that they had acquired social skills and confidence in urban areas, for example in relation to negotiating with government officials. They also said that their experience of leaving the village had given them the perspective required to appreciate the village's 'mahaul'.

Migrant mentors thus understood themselves as rural cosmopolitans, in Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's (2003) sense of people with an everyday capacity to deploy technologies, ideas or experiences derived from one place in a different arena. Smith and Gergan (2015) have recently referred to the capacity of Himalayan youth who have migrated to urban areas in north India to develop "cosmopolitan sensibilities' through cultivating identities as citizens of a wider 'Asian' region, for example via purchasing East Asian-style clothing. By contrast, our analysis points to how migrants develop a cosmopolitan sensibility through their re-engagement with their home village and capacity in this context to read and influence the village's atmosphere.

Migrant mentors said that they were not especially active in terms of social action in cities. They said that they occasionally organised political discussions without seeking to become involved in urban politics or social action in any more engaged way. But in the village they

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felt it their 'duty' (*farz*) to act. They explained this sense of obligation in part through reference to their attachment to Bemni and in part by referring to their perception that they are better able to act than are other youth; "if we can do it, we should", one young man said.

Much of the recent literature on urban prefigurative movements includes discussions of the dangers of romanticising seemingly 'democratic' prefigurative action (e.g. Halvorsen 2017). In a similar vein it is important to note that class and caste prejudice marked migrant mentors' efforts to assist the village. For example, they evaluated traditional systems of labour sharing as egalitarian. But there is historical evidence of the marginalisation of SCs from such systems (Berreman 1963). Moreover, migrant mentors did not tend to address issues of caste discrimination that remain important in Bemni, for example with respect to SCs' capacity to move freely through fields surrounding the village, their ability to comport themselves with confidence in GC homes, and their capacity to command respect in public meetings.

Migrant Politicos

In addition to migrant mentors, we encountered seven young people living outside Bemni who had become political representatives or held formal political positions in local/regional government. Like Rampal, these young people–all of them men–spent a substantial amount of time in Bemni working as advisors and seeking to engender social action.

Habir is a good example of a migrant politico. He was 26 in 2012 and worked for a water company in Dehra Dun, earning Rs. 9,000 a month. Habir said that he wants a government job, "But there is so much bribery and social favouritism, my chances are low." Habir had been educated up to 10th class in a town close to Bemni and conducted a degree from a college the district town, Gopeshwar. Habir's wife and child lived in Bemni and he planned to return to the village within ten years. Habir spent roughly three months a year in the village during the long leave period he obtained from his post. While in Bemni, he spent a portion of his time advising his father and uncle on a scheme to grow vegetables under poly-tunnels in the village. Habir had been instrumental in obtaining a Government grant from Delhi to obtain the technology and his family were growing red peppers, chillies, aubergine and spinach in the poly-tunnel in 2012 – the first family to engage in such an experiment in Bemni.

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Habir spent the remainder of his time engaging in political work in Bemni. He said, “I try to be calm and useful in all my conversations with people in Bemni. I try to behave in the way that I think all of society should behave.” Many of the Bemni-based young people who performed social and political work in the village saw Habir as a source of guidance. They went to his house when he returned from Dehra Dun to receive briefings on State politics, Government policy, and the machinations of district political officials. Older Bemni villagers also perceived Habir to be a type of representative of the “next generation” (*agli pithi*) in the village. They went to him to obtain guidance on social conflicts and relationships with government bureaucrats. Habir provided rich commentaries to villagers on the nature and evils of local corruption.

What was especially striking about Habir’s work was his careful attention to cultivating links simultaneously with other migrant youth, who returned from urban areas to Bemni, and young people who were based solely in the village. Habir had grown up with these other young people–other migrants and villagers–and could draw on a fund of friendship and shared memory. But he also felt that these bonds could not be taken for granted. He said that he was responsible for trying to knit young people together in the project of building a better mahaul. This weaving together of other youth occurred solely among GCs, however, and tended to be restricted to men.

Habir said that he is not a “leader.” “I am one among many and when I am out of the village there are many other young people who lead,” he said. As in some other contexts in which prefigurative action is common, Habir avoided the cultivation of ego (see Polletta and Hoban 2016). He argued that his effect on wider society was a subtle one, borne simply of his spending time in Bemni and demonstrating through his actions what he imagined as good conduct.

Habir said that he worked mainly to seed new ideas among other young people in Bemni. He said that he often organises “tea conferences” in his house where five or six educated young men will discuss how to address a pressing concern. Habir said that he had developed this idea first in urban areas but wanted to also institutionalise the practice in the village. He claimed that, unlike the government panchayat, people in the tea conference are not concerned with trying to embezzle money but rather discuss from first principles the most important issues affecting the village and how to solve them. Habir also stressed that as a migrant he is able to bring new perspectives to these meetings and

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catalyse social initiatives among youth based solely in the village. As in the case of migrant mentors, Habir saw himself as what Jeffrey and McFarlane (2008) term a 'ordinary cosmopolitan': a person with the experience of markedly different places that in turn provides embodied skills and capacities useful for others.

Habir himself often debated the idea of prefigurative politics with us. "You are right it is important," he said. But he maintained that the unremitting modelling of a future world is not helpful. He spoke instead of the need to tack strategically between 'being the change' and being pragmatic. He favoured the type of 'soft prefiguration' that scholars have regarded as being most effective (Maeckelburgh 2011).

While migrant mentors often spoke especially of the issue of the social cohesiveness of the village, Habir and other migrant politicos tended to focus to a greater extent on developmental aspects of improving the 'mahaul' of the village. Much of Habir's focus in 2014 and 2015 was on the project of building a new private school in Bemni in village. He felt that the government school lacked good discipline and that the teaching in Maths and English, in particular was poor. Habir went on to explain that the Bemni mahaul had become inimical to education. He said:

Yes, we now have electricity and a road. But the mahaul is still so different from Dehra Dun. Parents cannot provide their children with assistance with their homework. There is shouting and arguing when children should be concentrating. It is very difficult to study in the dirt and dust of the village.

In spite of his claims to be assisting the village as a whole, however, Habir was dismissive about the poverty of SCs in Bemni. He said that they had had many opportunities to contribute to village development but had failed to do so. He also argued that the state had channelled resources to SCs to the detriment of the living standards of marginalised GC households in the village. Habir rarely spoke to SC youth in the village and showed little concern for the economic and social issues facing this population.

There were no Muslims in the local area, and migrant politicos did not prosecute a Hindu nationalist agenda. But Habir and other migrant politicos sometimes discussed the attributes of a 'good mahaul' by making disparaging references to Muslims' alleged 'rahen-

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sahen' (way of living), reflecting the influence of Hindu nationalist ideas in India in the 2010s.

Other young people said that they do not simply listen to what Habir says but also watch his manner. "We need to learn from Habir's "*uthna baithna*" they said. *Uthna baithna* – literally "manner of getting up and sitting down" – referred to Habir's general comportment. Young people saw that Habir's effectiveness as a politico resided at some deep-seated level in his general manner with others.

Habir is typical of the seven young men whom we met who work as migrant politicos in Bemni. All of these men were educated to at least 10th class, lived mainly outside Bemni, returned regularly to the village, and worked as role models for other youth and younger children. They had a symbiotic relationship with migrant mentors, who operated more informally within Bemni, and Bemni-based youth involved in social and political action. Migrant politicos could provide key information (*jankaari*), tactical advice and a model of how to behave with officials, migrant mentors worked at a more informal level to offer assistance with political and social projects, and Bemni-based youth tried on a more constant basis to campaign around such issues as increasing electricity supply to the village, reducing corruption in the local government council, and improving the attendance rates of teachers in the government school.

After months of discussion, and based especially on his tea conference conversations, Habir and several other migrant politicos worked with migrant mentors and social actors based in Bemni to outline plans for establishing an NGO in the village. They imagined this NGO as a vehicle for founding a private school and as a 'model institution' for other NGOs in the region. Yet the plans to organise their activity in this manner were still at an embryonic stage when we visited the village in 2015. At that time, the work of young men involved in prefigurative politics in Bemni occurred outside formal institutions and in ways that brought them into close contact with villagers. This reflected a general distrust of party politics, which was seen to be corrupt, bureaucrats' political activities–viewed as venal and self-serving–and the activities of most NGOs in the region, which migrant politicos viewed as being out of touch with the everyday realities of young people.

Young women

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There were also twelve young women based outside Bemni who returned to provide political assistance in the village and worked as everyday prefigurative agents. These young women were less involved in offering themselves as mentors for other young people in relation to public social projects, in the manner of Rampal and his compatriots. They also avoided engagement with the type of political issues associated with the work of Habir. Rather, they participated more concertedly in efforts to model how they believed educated women should behave in Bemni and, by extension, how young women could contribute to improving the mahaul of the village. We interviewed eight of these young women.

Manju is a good example. She was 27 in 2012 and one of only four women in Bemni to have acquired a Bachelors degree at that time. In 2012 Manju worked as a part-time teacher in a private school in Dehra Dun while also preparing for government teaching examinations. She had been repeatedly unsuccessful in obtaining a government position, however. She returned to Bemni every two months to be with her family and work as a volunteer in the local government nursery.

Manju believed that the mahaul of Bemni had worsened since her childhood. She complained of a rise of selfishness, egoism, and drunkenness. She also spoke of local environmental degradation related to climate change, deforestation and the increase of construction in Bemni. Manju said that it was the responsibility (*zimmedaari*) as an educated person and someone familiar with conditions outside Bemni to improve this mahaul by demonstrating to young women and children how to behave. She said that it was important to speak in a forthright but polite manner in public, assert oneself when necessary, and communicate respect for senior members of the village. She said that it was also necessary to be aware of the latest developments in terms of education, health, and work. Manju was involved in spreading awareness of family planning. She counselled other women, including SC young women, on work and health opportunities. Moreover, Manju often interceded in social disputes between young women who were pursuing pre-marital romantic relationships and their parents, seeking to diffuse conflict and raise parents' awareness of social change. She described this activity as political work because of the extent to which it involved navigating conflict and negotiating compromise.

Manju said that being migrant made it difficult sometimes to develop momentum with respect to particular projects. But she said that her experience of urban life was important in allowing her to work effectively in Bemni. She said that she builds bridges between the

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rural and urban, drawing the best elements out of both spheres. As in the case of migrant mentors and migrant politicos, she seemed to imagine herself as a type of rural cosmopolitan (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003).

At the same time, Manju had not developed a close relationship with SC women in the village and was critical of many SCs. She said that SCs, unlike GCs, refuse to accept the value of nursery attendance and primary education. She also said that SCs, to a greater extent than GCs, lack knowledge of health and food. She recounted a prolonged effort she had made to persuade SCs in the village of the nutritional value of the soya beans that are periodically distributed by the government to children and menstruating adolescents/women in the village. Manju:

I even made soya bean food for the SC households to show them exactly how good it would taste. I have done this with a lot of the foodstuffs – demonstrating their value and tastiness. But it has not worked. The SCs say, 'Don't give us soya beans because we won't use them'.

Manju was keen to be inclusive in her work, but she found it difficult to engage empathetically with SCs in the village.

Manju placed great emphasis on the development of close personal relationships within Bemni as a means of achieving social transformation – again paralleling research on everyday prefigurative action in other contexts (see Ward 1976; Ince 2010). Manju said that she had a mutually beneficial relationship with young women who are based permanently in Bemni. She could provide advice to local young women, many of whom she had known as a child. The young women, in turn, could sustain projects in ways that would not be possible for someone who visited Bemni only intermittently.

Manju died in 2013 of unknown causes. There was an outpouring of grief in the village. Many young people spoke of the gradual but transformative influence Manju had had on their lives. They said that her work indicated the crucial importance of leadership in the village.

Manju's case is in some respects unusual. She was one of the most educated young women in the village. But there were seven other young women whom we interviewed who played very similar roles in Bemni in the period between 2012 and 2015. Like Manju, these women

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all had at least a 12th Class (senior high school) education. They all advised villagers on issues of gender empowerment, health and education, and they viewed themselves explicitly as role models engaged in a political effort to "change the mahaul of the village". They encouraged young women to persist with education, improved women's access to knowledge about family planning and other health advice, and critiqued the use of alcohol and damaging pursuit of self interest in the village. Like Manju, these young women did not engage closely with issues of caste inequality, however, reflecting the dangers of romanticising everyday prefiguration (see Ince 2010).

There were therefore similarities in how the different subsets of migrant activists worked to 'improve' Bemni, even while the particular manner in which they did so varied. All three 'groups' paid close attention to the problem of Bemni's declining mahaul. They all worked through their action to improve this mahaul. They sometimes said that being a migrant made it difficult to coordinate their work. But they all depended to an extent on being able to utilise the skills and experience that migrating to urban areas had provided them.

Conclusions

With important exceptions, recent research on prefigurative politics has tended to focus on urban movements and has been concentrated in the global North. Through ethnographic research in rural Uttarakhand we have identified forms of prefigurative politics that occur in everyday contexts and outside named organisations. In particular, the rise of an educated cohort of young people with opportunities to travel had created a generation of migrant youth in the village of Bemni who worked as mentors, political guides, or social helpers and explicitly channelled their political energy into 'being the change'. They did not typically seek to institutionalise their activity. They operated instead within society, directing people towards efforts to improve 'basic needs': education, health, social cooperation, and infrastructure. Young people engaged in this prefigurative action because they felt it their duty to guide the village towards what they believed would be an acceptable form of modernity, felt invested in the village, saw themselves and their children occupying the village in the future, and believed themselves distinctively able to act to improve the village's 'mahaul' (atmosphere) as a result of their experience of migrating between rural and urban areas.

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Young people were important in the spread of positive images of education and modern healthcare. In addition, they worked to address environmental degradation and repair and improve the physical infrastructure of the village. They had a more diffuse positive effect on people's mood, especially among young people, reflecting how prefigurative politics can have subtle social and psychological benefits (Schneider 2013).

The effectiveness of the youth social action we have described should not be overstated, however. The influence of migrant young people was largely restricted to higher castes, and their actions may have had the cumulative effect of entrenching inequalities between GCs and SCs. Moreover, the claim to be improving the village's 'mahaul' sometimes reflected aversion to the 'dirt and dust' (*dhool mithi*) of the village that is consistent with wider urban middle class and caste prejudices (see Dyson 2014) The paper thus highlights the potential for prefigurative politics to have largely 'positive' effects on surrounding society, but also highlights contradictions associated with youth prefigurative action (Graeber 2013; Springer 2014).

We have made multiple points about the geographies of prefiguration. The existing literature on prefigurative politics often focuses on the discrete spaces created through prefigurative action, even while stressing the multi-scalar and 'relational' nature of such spaces (Vasudevan 2015b). Young people in Bemni did not usually build distinct settings in which to operate, although the tea conference meetings are a possible exception. Rather, they channelled effort into embodying the action they wanted to see generalised in society. They claimed that such embodiment allied to an effort to engage closely in the social life of the village on their return home served as a basis for the diffusion of 'good conduct'.

Migrant youth faced problems in maintaining social and political projects in the context of their own shifts back and forth between the village and the site of their work. They have addressed these difficulties not primarily through the use of communication technologies–the dominant theme in existing literature on how prefigurative politicians develop and disseminate their work–but rather by exploiting the spatial and cultural knowledge that comes from living across the rural and urban, as 'ordinary cosmopolitans' (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Their migration served as a basis for cultivating useful knowledge and skills. This type of 'bridging' strategy is allied to one of 'bonding', to recall a distinction commonly made in social movement literature (see Sajuria et al. 2014): Migrant youth also

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manage the problem of how to enacting political campaigns at the everyday level through developing effective working relations with each other and with youth based wholly in the village.

It is common for young people in the global South to be living in ways that connect the rural and urban. Our paper usefully highlights how people navigate moving across the rural and urban, navigations that are not usually analysed in depth in the urban literature (see Bayat 2013 for an important exception).

Commentators frequently note the salience of spatial tropes and narratives in prefigurative political action (e.g. Schneider 2013). In Bemni young people developed their work through reference to the powerful spatial idea of 'mahaul', a word that translates as 'atmosphere' and denotes simultaneously aspects of the social, environmental and political ambiance of Bemni. For young people in Bemni, prefigurative politics entailed orientating development in Bemni away from individualism and towards the type of reciprocal relations that they characterised as a core feature of a 'good mahaul' and which they remembered as an element of their own childhood in the village. These conclusions link our account of everyday prefiguration to both the early anarchist work of Landauer (1978 [1911]) in which social change is imagined as being process-driven, experimental, and requiring the cultivation of relationship of affinity (see also Ince 2010). Our paper has thus shown that young people's politics in Bemni is not only 'everyday' in the sense of being preoccupied with basic needs but also in the sense of being bound up in anxieties over the affective qualities of specific places.

The wider implications of these arguments for the discipline of geography are threefold. First, we have shown that prefigurative politics can serve as a conceptual touchstone for social geographers and political geographers. It is broad enough to address multiple geographical themes but focused enough on one idea–privileging the enacting of goals in the process of struggle–to encourage meaningful debate. Second, we have highlighted the value of conducting fine-grained long-term research on everyday prefiguration as a means to advance debates on social movements and activism (see also Springer 2014). Third, we have stressed that a focus on 'micro' aspects of prefiguration can connect geographical social movement literature to research that engages with the nuances of people's sense of space, place, and atmosphere.

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