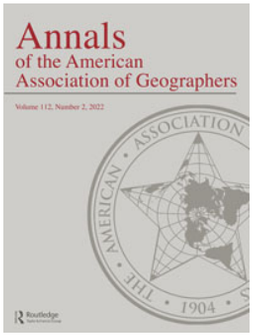

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Fragments for the Future: Selective Urbanism in Rural North India

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Scholars are increasingly rethinking the urban, the rural, and the urban–rural binary. This article advances understanding of rural and urban imaginaries through examining how young people in a village in north India develop practices that they regard as "urban" to protect rural futures. Young adults (aged eighteen to thirty) in the village of Bemni, Uttarakhand, develop urban-style educational facilities and agricultural practices as well as performances of gender empowerment imagined as urban with a view to improving the functioning of their village and preventing migration to cities. Through analyzing these practices of "selective urbanism," we point to the production of ideas of urbanism and rurality beyond the metropolitan and large city regions usually studied and the importance especially of the performance of urban fragments in people's conceptions of rural futures. We also examine how value is attached to ideas of the rural and urban and how people deploy as well as problematize the rural–urban binary. *Key Words: future, India, rural, urban, youth.*

In April 2017, in the village of Bemni,[1] Uttarakhand, north India, a young man named Kunwar Singh hand-delivered 150 heavily embossed cards inviting guests to the inauguration of his small private school. The following morning, welcomed by a master of ceremonies on a squawky sound system, villagers shuffled into the rows of chairs lined up in front of the new school. Special guests were garlanded and ushered to their places under a colorful marquee usually reserved for weddings. There were at least fifteen local notables: heads of local village councils, school principals, and district officials. Kunwar Singh, as host and director of the school, began to organize photographs as the growing crowd jostled for a view of the stage. It was the first time that the village had witnessed such a lavish celebration for any inauguration and there was a palpable sense that something major was about to happen. "Come!" someone shouted to a group of latecomers, "The village's new urban (*shehri*) school is opening."

This article examines how young people in Bemni staged visions of urban activity to improve the village during the 2010s. We focus on three key areas: the development of educational facilities that have broadly urban characteristics, new forms of agriculture associated with relatively urbanized parts of Uttarakhand, and visions of gender empowerment imagined locally as being in some sense "urban." We argue that young people were developing these urban forms and dynamics to showcase how practices coded locally as "rural" and "urban" might be combined to secure economic and social opportunities and improve the prospects of villagers remaining in Bemni in the face of growing outmigration.

In analyzing these processes, the article contributes to understanding of the cultural production of rural and urban environments. Several scholars have studied the manner in which people think about the urban and rural in and around major cities (e.g., Chari 2004; McGee 2014). There has, however, been less research on rural and urban imaginations in rural areas (but see, e.g., Smith and Gergan 2015; Deuchar 2019; Gergan and Smith 2020). Through developing an account of how young people aged eighteen to thirty develop notions of urbanism and rurality in the north Indian village of Bemni, we expand understanding of the types of situations in which the rural–urban binary comes to shape aspects of social life outside the major city regions usually studied.

We point especially to young people's judicious approach to creating urban forms and practices. Young people's performances of urbanism in Bemni are selective in the triple sense that they tend to

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only select elements—or "fragments" (*tukada*), as they put it—of the urban to deploy in the village; they differentiate between various types of town and city in deciding how to perform the urban locally; and they argue that their urban performances should remain only as elements of local practice. In doing so, they aim not to transform their village into an urban area but to alter the village just enough to ensure the viability of rural futures. These arguments demonstrate the continuing importance of the binary of the rural–urban in shaping people's imaginations, the diverse manner in which people attach values to the rural and urban, and people's plural visions of urbanism and rurality.

The remainder of the article is divided into six sections. First, we discuss relevant recent literature on rural–urban geographies. We then introduce our field area before analyzing in successive sections three sets of young people: those working as educational entrepreneurs, those involved in developing agricultural technologies, and young women who style themselves as "speakers" and try to challenge some patriarchal attitudes around gender. The concluding section reflects on how our analysis advances the existing literature.

Rural–Urban Geographies

The spread of urbanization across the world has resulted in the emergence of a wide variety of landscapes, forms, and practices that appear to combine elements of the urban and rural (Brenner and Schmid 2014; Merrifield 2014; Roy 2016). For example, several scholars have charted how changes in governance and planning have led former rural sites to be recategorized as urban areas (Roy 2016; Gold 2017; Mukhopadhyay, Zerah, and Denis 2017). Others have examined periurban or extraurban regions in which classically rural and urban jurisdictions and forms of land use are tangled and confused (McGee 2008, 2014; Harms 2011; Keil 2013), including McGee's (2014) work on "desakota urbanism" and Gold's (2017) work on small-town urbanism (see also Roy 2016; van Duijne and Nijman 2019).

A key emerging theme in this work is of the capacity of people to combine visions and practices of rurality and urbanism (Roy 2016). Scholars have shown that in cities, periurban sites, small towns across the world, or ribbon settlements along roads, organizations and individuals have come to reflect on how their environments are rural or urban, how precisely to imagine rurality and urbanism, and the process through which they might deploy ideas or practices derived from the rural in the urban (Simone 2004; Roy 2016). Among the studies of these phenomena in cities, Jeffrey and Young (2014) pointed to how people living on the edge of Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, seek to create identities that blend urbanism and rurality. Simcik-Arese (2018) made similar arguments about the efforts of people to combine elements of the rural and urban in navigating new settlements on the edge of Cairo, Egypt. Other studies of people's efforts to create rural–urban hybrid landscapes or practices include work on how rural land-owning classes influence urban industry (Chari 2004; see also De Boeck 2015), the practices through which marginalized groups develop rural enclaves that combine rural and urban practice (El Faiz 2012), and how migrants come to imagine aspects of their behavior as either urban or rural and create specific combinations of urbanism and rurality as they move across boundaries (Chakraborty 2018; Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Deuchar 2019).

Building on field research in India, Gidwani and Ramamurthy (2018) theorized such efforts to create visions or practices that combine the rural and urban as "cultural productions" (Willis 1981). In this view, the act of deploying a rural or urban practice in another zone reflects dominant practices and discourses, such as media depictions of urban life, and the agentive capacity of people to reassemble and rethink cultural materials in light of their agendas.

Although relatively muted as a theme, researchers have also examined how organizations or individuals engage in the cultural production of the urban in rural areas. Migrants with urban experience often serve as a conduit for the development of urban styles and practices in the countryside; for example, through the construction of city-style houses and via their wider consumption practices (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Deuchar 2019; Dyson 2019a). Rural middle classes also commonly seek to combine urban ideas, forms, and practices with rural forms as a basis for marking social mobility (Cohen 2004; Jeffrey 2010). Moreover, young people are often in the vanguard of efforts to create urban–rural combinations in rural settings. For example, Deuchar (2019) documented the process through which north Indian youth performed visions of themselves as "urban people" in rural areas; for example, via their clothing and

speech, while—conversely—emphasizing their rural roots in urban areas. These presentations provided a basis for building a sense of self-respect in rural and urban areas, respectively.

Three themes commonly surface in research on the cultural production of the rural and urban in different sites. First, several studies suggest that individuals and institutions often seek to create discrete fragments, scenes, or enclaves of the rural in the urban or the urban in the rural to advance their agendas. For example, Bentall and Corbridge (1996) described how the Bharatiya Kisan Union farmers' movement in north India developed ostentatious rural camps in strategic locations within towns as a means of reminding urban populations of farmers' political strength. In a somewhat similar vein, Accarigi and Crosby (2019) reflected on the potential for the strategic deployment of plants to trigger new thinking on urban space in Australian cities (see also Gidwani and Baviksar 2011).

A second theme in emerging studies of the cultural production of rural–urban mixing is of the different types of value that are attached to the rural and urban. In many parts of the world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, dominant organizations attached particular forms of economic, social, or moral worth to urban or rural areas. This is reflected in colonial agendas (Simone 2004; Robinson 2006; McFarlane 2014), development theory that promoted the urban over the rural (Lipton 1977), and dominant masculinist imaginaries (Oswin 2018), for example. Cultural productions of the rural and urban and of the mixing of the rural and urban often reflect these dominant imaginaries (see, e.g., Fei 1992).

At the same time, scholars have shown how people on the ground commonly modify, transform, or subvert dominant ideas of the urban and rural, as Willis's (1981) notion of cultural production would lead us to expect. Many recent studies emphasize especially the ambivalent nature of people's understandings of rurality and urbanism (Simone 2004; Deuchar 2019; Gergan and Smith 2020). For example, people often regard aspects of the urban as positive but also other elements of urbanity as deeply negative, an ambivalence that might be reflected in resistance to becoming urban (Roy 2016; see also Ferguson 2007; Chakraborty 2018).

A third theme of much of the work on rural–urban geographies is of the difficulty of sustaining the duality of urban and rural. People often discuss multiple ruralities or urbanisms. For example, Smith and Gergan (2015) described how in some north Indian small towns young people seek respect through imitating East Asian urban youth styles as a counterpoint to more local urban forms (see also Smith 2017). Other work has documented the distinction many people make between small town and metropolitan regions in the Global South, problematizing the notion of a homogeneous urban (Mukhopadhyay, Zerah, and Denis 2017; Brown 2018).

Scholars have also critiqued the rural–urban binary in more conceptual and political terms; for example, from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and political economy perspectives (Nguyen and Locke 2014; Buckley and Strauss 2016; Roy 2016). Dominant institutions have deployed the urban–rural dualism—often alongside other binaries such as public–private, man–woman, straight–queer—to the detriment of marginalized sections of society (see also Oswin 2018; Ruddick et al. 2018).

Building on this literature, this article examines the cultural production of ideas of urbanism in a rural setting with particular attention to the themes of fragments, value, and the move beyond binaries. More specifically, we consider the extent to which and how people selectively perform aspects of urban practice within a rural setting. We also examine how people ascribe value to the urban and rural and the implications of these evaluations for their own and the village's futures.

Bemni, North India

Bemni is located in a relatively remote part of Chamoli district in the Indian state of Uttarakhand at an altitude of 2,700 m. Its economy is primarily agricultural: Households cultivate a range of crops for subsistence and manage the nearby forest for pastoral use. In 2012, the village had a population of approximately 1,000, of which roughly 75 percent were General Castes (GCs) and 25 percent were Scheduled Caste (SC).[2] GCs have significantly longer landholdings than SCs and have better access to social networks outside the village.

Patriarchy continues to mark the lives of people in Chamoli District. In Bemni, villagers typically expect that women should concentrate on roles as subsistence farmers, wives, and mothers rather than seeking paid employment outside the home (see also

Klenk 2010). Men tend to have greater control over decision making within households regarding finance and strategy.

Bemni changed dramatically since 2003, when Jane began fieldwork in the village. Many households built new homes between 2004 and 2017, often replacing one-room stone dwellings that accommodated families and their livestock with larger buildings with separate cow stalls (see Dyson 2014). Between 2008 and 2012, the government installed electricity and a telecommunications tower and built a road (the village had previously been accessible only by foot).

The educational landscape was also in the midst of transformation. General educational levels of boys and young men had increased rapidly over the 1990s and 2000s, and, although lagging behind, girls' education also rose quickly. Until then, parents had seen little reason to educate their daughters, in part reflecting their substantial contribution to agricultural and household work. From the early 2000s, however, parents began to send girls to primary school in larger numbers, and later increasingly to secondary level school. Nevertheless, gender and caste-based inequalities in educational outcomes remained a marked feature of Bemni's social landscape until 2019 (see Dyson 2019b).

Between 2003 and 2019, the educational infrastructure developed to address this rising demand for schooling. In the early 2000s, children studied to Fifth Class in the Bemni primary school or up to Eighth Class in a nearby village. In relatively rare cases, they continued their studies by walking ninety minutes each way to the nearest high school or left Bemni to attend urban schools or colleges. By 2012, the neighboring junior school was extended up to Class 10, and Classes 11 and 12 were added in 2017, with major implications for the educational outcomes of girls in particular.

This rise in education was also reflected in the increasing migration of young men (and to a much lesser extent young women) out of the village in search of work. Until the late 2000s, young men generally aspired to join the army, lured by the health and pension benefits. As educational requirements made it harder for village-educated men to enlist, however, they increasingly sought service work in sales, marketing, and hospitality in the state capital of Dehra Dun or in the metropolitan centers of Delhi and Mumbai (see also Smith and Gergan 2015; Chakraborty 2018; Gergan and Smith 2020). Nevertheless, it has been common for these young people to return to Bemni within the first five years of leaving, often because of caregiving responsibilities in the village and a failure to secure a living income in urban areas.

With ever improving road accessibility, Bemni is now located two hours' drive from the market town of Lawad and three and half hours' drive from the district town of Gopeshwar.[3] Since the early 2000s, Lawad and Gopeshwar have expanded rapidly in their population and services, reflecting the growth of urban functions at sites remote from metropolitan areas, what van Duijne and Nijman (2019) termed "emergent remote urbanization" (see also Scrase et al. 2015; Gold 2017; Tumbe 2018). Lawad and Gopeshwar are interstitial in nature: They are oriented primarily to their rural hinterland and are poorly linked to metropolitan centers. Like many other small and medium-sized towns in India, though (see Mukhopadhyay, Zerah, and Denis 2017), they are significant centers of dynamism in certain areas, notably construction, transport, cell phone and Internet communications, private education, and private health care.

Jane conducted fifteen months of fieldwork in Bemni in 2003 and 2004, focusing primarily on children's work and schooling. In addition to this work, this article draws primarily on eighteen months of fieldwork conducted largely by Jane but also by Craig, over thirteen trips between 2012 and 2019. We conducted participant observation and open-ended interviews with roughly 120 young people (aged eighteen to thirty). Our discussions were usually carried out while working alongside young people in the fields or forest, accompanying them during marriage or religious celebrations, or in their homes. The main focus of our conversations was young people's social and political action. We also spent a great deal of time talking about their views of their practices and how they conceptualized their action in relation to time, space, development, and the state.

The issue of the urban and rural emerged strongly from these conversations. Villagers commonly distinguished between local towns, such as Lawad and Gopeshwar, and what they term the "metros," meaning not only India's largest cities but also second-order cities such as the state capital of Dehra Dun. They then counterposed the small towns and the

metros with the term *ganv*, meaning village. A further distinction between *pahari* (mountainous) and *neeche* (which literally means "down below") partially overlays the urban–rural distinction. Both of these terms were relational: *Pahari* could mean both high-altitude villages or hilly Uttarakhand as a whole, whereas *neeche* typically referred to either the north Indian plains or relatively urbanized parts of low-altitude Uttarakhand. For example, villagers often referred to villages or even local small towns such as Lawad as *pahari*, and more urbanized areas were often considered comparatively *neeche*, even if they were located in hilly parts of Uttarakhand. The distant metropolis of Delhi was wholly *neeche*. These observations must be read cautiously, however; as others have noted (see Moller 2000; Chakraborty 2018; Deuchar 2019), villagers deployed the terms *urban* (using the English word or *shehri*), *rural* (in English, or *ganv*/village), *pahari*, and *neeche* in ways that varied over time and according to context—as further explored in what follows.

We focus in this article on a subset of twenty-eight GC young people who discussed the nature of the rural and urban and engaged in the cultural production of urbanism in Bemni and its surroundings. We divide these GC youth into three sets: a group of ten young people who were engaged in educational entrepreneurship, ten young people who were involved in developing agriculture, and eight young women who described themselves as "speakers" (*bolniwali*) who performed a vision of urban gender empowerment within the rural space.

Educational Entrepreneurship

We encountered six men and four women who tried to enhance the village through developing what they termed urban (using the English) or *shehri* educational facilities. The example of Kunwar Singh gives a strong sense of these young people's activities.[4] Kunwar Singh was twenty-eight years old in 2017, had a BA degree, and had lived for three years in metropolitan north India. Like many young men, when he failed to obtain secure (*pukka*) work in the city, he returned to Bemni where he combined his subsistence farming with teaching on a casual basis in local schools.

Kunwar Singh was an ardent believer in the power of education to transform people's lives, but he lamented that the village government schools paid scant attention to students' intellectual development and failed to develop an "educational atmosphere" (*parhai ka mahaul*; see also Chakraborty 2018). He argued that improving the situation would not only ensure that children acquired good schooling but also help maintain the integrity of the village. Kunwar Singh regularly gave examples of how people in his generation were leaving the village in search of better schooling for their children. "We need to adapt for the village to survive," he told us several times.

Kunwar Singh worked with a restless energy in the educational sphere. He regularly lectured younger villagers about the value of studying properly for local exams and he organized extracurricular activities at the local government secondary school (see also Deuchar 2019). For five months in 2012, he voluntarily housed and gave daily tuition to two girls studying Class 10 exams, one of whom subsequently achieved the highest grades in the entire block (administrative unit) of twenty-five villages. Between 2014 and 2016, he provided free English and mathematics tutorials to groups of ten to twenty students, to encourage them to invest in their studies. These were popular at first, but when he began asking parents for small payments, the flow of students dried up. Kunwar Singh bemoaned the situation: "Villagers will spend Rs. 500 on liquor but not Rs. 50 on the schooling of a child for a month."

From the middle of 2016, Kunwar Singh began to feel a double pressure. Several of his village peers had left or were debating leaving the village because of the absence of good schools. At the same time, Kunwar Singh became increasingly frustrated when other friends, who had left the village to work in urban centers, regularly asked him to open a private school. They offered encouragement and guidance but were unwilling to return to Bemni to help. We often sat with Kunwar Singh as he discussed his predicament: "I'm desperate to open a school—I want to help people stay in the village—but if nobody helps, I can't do it alone. It's too risky." He had already worked so hard to socialize the idea of a better education among other villagers but lacked the financial means to realize his goals.

Kunwar Singh's luck changed at the beginning of 2017. He met a young man named Rishi who had already opened private schools in other villages in the district. After liaising several times to discuss the plans, action followed fast. Rishi and Kunwar Singh

registered two schools, one in a village close to Bemni, which Rishi would manage, and another in Bemni that would be Kunwar Singh's responsibility. They decided to focus on preprimary and early primary pupils and build up their cohort from the bottom. The two men persuaded the leader of the local *panchayat* (village council) to allow Kunwar Singh to use an abandoned *panchayat* building as the school's office and classroom.

Kunwar Singh often talked about the importance of marketing his school cleverly. These ideas guided the school's official opening, which Kunwar Singh specifically designed to mimic inaugurations in nearby towns such as Gopeshwar. Formal invitations were sent out in advance and special guests were presented with locally woven hangings and sweets. A sound system relayed the speeches of local notables and Kunwar Singh filmed the proceedings on his phone. Kunwar Singh also took advantage of our presence as foreign researchers in the village, asking Craig to give a speech. None of these types of practices had occurred for a village-based institution before: Indeed, several guests reported feeling proud but also rather out of place and underdressed. Despite the high cost of the event, Kunwar Singh said that the ostentatious opening ceremony was necessary to signal that he had established an urban-type school and to build a sense of "belief" (*vishwas*) in his project.

Kunwar Singh took up the position of the director and only teacher, working full-time with the ten students across two preprimary school classes. He avoided what he perceived as a laxness of many government teachers in rural villages: He always arrived on time and attended to the needs of individual students. Kunwar Singh emphasized that students must behave politely, claiming, "To create an educational environment [*parhai ka mahaul*], it's important to show the children how to behave. I have to do this every single day. Part of the struggle is just making sure their manner of moving about [*chal chalan*] and their general manners [*uthna baithna*] are good … they have to learn about discipline." Each day he assessed students' uniforms, ensured that their hair was brushed, and checked that they had handkerchiefs pinned to their sweaters with which to wipe their perpetually runny noses. He prioritized the physical appearance of the school, buying expensive plastic tables and chairs to distinguish his institution from government schools, where children sat on mats often outside in the sun. Again, Kunwar Singh referred to schools in Gopeshwar and other large Uttarakhand towns as a model for his approach.

Kunwar Singh set the fees very low and the school was earning very little money by late 2019, but it soon garnered a good reputation and enrollment swelled to twenty students. Several parents said that it provided a better education than the government schools and that it had enabled them to keep their children in the village rather than sending them out to urban schools. Kunwar Singh felt that he had achieved his goal of creating what he termed an urban (using the English word) school within Bemni village.

Kunwar Singh's example is more widely indicative. Many commentators have pointed to the capacity of young people in rural India to draw on urban experiences to develop new ways of approaching social life in villages, focusing especially on migrants (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Smith and Gergan 2017; Deuchar 2019; Dyson 2019a). In line with this work, our fieldwork showed how several young people used experiences in small-town or metropolitan India to produce urban styles of schooling in the village. They provided tutorials, worked part-time in schools, or campaigned to improve government and private educational facilities in the region.

Deuchar (2019) explored similar work in another part of Uttarakhand and attributed young people's actions as educational mentors as an effort to garner self-respect (see also Deuchar and Dyson 2020). In the case of Bemni, young people's motivations were more diverse. For some, educational entrepreneurship offered a basis for simultaneously pursuing personal and community objectives. Two young women and one man in Bemni built on their village-based educational work and their reputation as education entrepreneurs to secure well-paid government teaching posts. Three others made smaller amounts of money by working as teaching assistants in local schools. Educational entrepreneurs, however, largely did not regard their work as an income opportunity or a means to improve their self-image. Rather, they considered it social service (*seva*), pursued to ensure the future vitality of the village (see also Klenk 2012; Koskimaki 2017). There are parallels here between our account and that of Koskimaki (2017, 2019) on youth in another part of Uttarakhand, who were also keen to "develop," and remain within, their home region. Koskimaki also emphasized young people's concern with rural

outmigration and fear of "empty villages" as a motivating force for Uttarakhandi youth.

Educational entrepreneurs' actions were forms of "cultural production" (Willis 1981) in the sense that their practices were marked by powerful ideologies while also reflecting youth agency. Dominant depictions of young people as dutiful citizens—relayed through film, via school textbooks, and government and nongovernmental organization (NGO) programs—tended not to mention major social inequalities. Similarly, young people such as Kunwar Singh were not particularly concerned with addressing poorer SC children's marginalization from schooling (although he did provide some free or reduced-rate places for SC children, as required by India's Right to Education Act). At the same time, youth in Bemni did not passively imbibe ideologies; they also tried to shape their approach to education to fit local circumstances. Moreover, the notion of cultural production usefully draws attention to the work required to develop urban practices in the village. Kunwar Singh's success rested on a long period of trial and error and many years of work socializing a new vision of education.

We did not find substantial evidence of parallel initiatives occurring among SC (Dalit) youth in Bemni. A few Dalit young people did mentor Dalit students, but they argued that the demands of farming or wage labor in the village or local towns made it difficult to develop the type of "social service" roles played by more financially secure GC youth. Importantly, however, SC youth did not discourage the activities of their GC peers but were generally supportive: For example, they praised Kunwar Singh's school and approved of health-focused initiatives developed by GC youth that included SCs as a target population (cf. Anandhi, Jeyaranjan, and Krishnan 2002; Ramamurthy 2010, 2011). The Dalits with whom we spoke broadly endorsed the efforts of young people such as Kunwar Singh to develop urban-style services in the village.

Young educational entrepreneurs in Bemni often referred to the differences between various forms of urbanization occurring in north India. They argued that they could not compete with facilities in the metros and those with enough money and contacts would probably migrate to Dehra Dun or Delhi anyway. Rather, they focused on providing an education that was better than or equivalent to that found in *pahari* (mountainous) urban areas; for example, that matched the schooling standards in the district town of Gopeshwar or at the very least in the smaller local town of Lawad. Chakraborty (2018) demonstrated that the young men in another part of Uttarakhand similarly distinguished between urban forms by distancing themselves from economic practices or opportunities in major cities to concentrate instead on *pahari* towns. The actions and views of educational entrepreneurs also support other work on the inadequacies of a simplistic urban–rural binary (Roy 2016; Oswin 2018). Young people in Bemni were not seeking to model a generalized urban standard of educational provision. Rather, they organized their efforts in relation to the perceived qualities of different settlements within an urban hierarchy.

Agricultural Change

Several scholars have pointed to how young people in India have tried to reconceptualize agriculture as a livelihood strategy in the face of a shortage of secure "white-collar" work (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008; Brown 2018; Chakraborty 2018). A set of youth in Bemni similarly expressed a need to reinvigorate farming for the village to survive. There were ten GC young people, eight men and two women, who sought to develop village agriculture.

Jagbir, who was twenty-nine in 2019, had a Twelfth Class pass and had spent two years in Mumbai shortly after his marriage, where he worked in hospitality. The work was not paid well, so he had returned to the village to farm and look after his elderly parents and two young children. In 2012, he bought two mules with which he earned a modest income transporting building materials in the village and, on a seasonal basis, carrying pilgrims at sacred sites in Uttarakhand.

Jagbir worried about the growing outmigration of young people and believed that the solution was to build initiatives—particularly new agricultural programs—that would provide economic incentives to stay. The best models for these enterprises, he believed, emanated from outside the village. As he put it:

> We need to bring in certain ideas from *neeche* [meaning "down below," referring in this case to relatively urbanized areas of Uttarakhand] … not everything, but we should take fragments [*tukade*] of what is happening *neeche*, like microcredit schemes and a prosperous way of life [*rahan sahan*]. We need to

motivate other young people [he emphasized the word *motivate* and used the English word].

In 2012, drawing on the advice of a visiting NGO from Gopeshwar, Jagbir encouraged young people to create a rotating credit association and to use that credit to develop business experiments. These new enterprises were diverse: One man acquired a portable sound system to rent out at weddings, one trained as an electrician, and another undertook a tailoring course. In the period from 2012 through 2019, however, many of these initiatives focused on new agricultural practices that young people regarded as relatively *neeche* (used deliberately as an adjective). As in the case of educational entrepreneurs, the focus was not on developing systems from the north Indian plains or from metropolitan India but rather emulating agricultural practices from lower altitude roadside villages that were better connected to urban markets or from other relatively urbanized areas in Uttarakhand. Although Jagbir believed that new agricultural techniques held the potential for economic opportunities, he argued that one person can do very little to change the situation. If there were a collective effort among young people, however, Bemni could thrive.

Jagbir and other young people told us that there was scope for a more thoughtful approach to agriculture. They encouraged the cultivation of high-value medicinal plants that could only survive at altitude and the development of small silk production units that made use of the surrounding forests (see also Chakraborty 2018), and some sought government grants to construct polytunnels to grow fruits and vegetables that would not otherwise grow at high altitude. There was a particular focus on establishing market gardens in plots surrounding their homes. The construction of the road in 2012 opened up new trading opportunities in Lawad, and a warming climate made it increasingly possible to try new crops such as peppers, garlic, cabbages, cauliflowers, and onions—vegetables that had not previously been consumed in the village. Since then, young men have developed a close knowledge of fluctuating prices in the market and sought information about growing conditions required for new crops. Whereas women carried out the considerably more labor-intensive subsistence farming, these new agricultural ventures were almost entirely run by young men, reflecting their association with the market economy.

There was a type of competitive masculinity underpinning some of this work (see also Osella and Osella 2006), wherein young men competed to demonstrate their prowess as enterprising farmers (see Dyson 2008; Gooptu 2013; Chakraborty 2018). Social media made it increasingly possible to share information from more urbanized parts of Uttarakhand. In recent years, some have spent considerable time researching new seed varieties online and experimented with expensive chemical fertilizers and insecticides in a bid to improve profitability. Such practices were unheard of in their otherwise proudly organic subsistence farming, where seeds were saved from previous harvests and aged manure was the only form of fertilizer. The success of these new agricultural initiatives became increasingly tied to young men's reputations in the village. Young men explicitly identified these initiatives as urban (using the word *shehri* or the English word *urban*) and sometimes *modern*, again using the English word.

Jagbir's emphasis on social organization was shared by others. In 2017, six young people gathered small donations to establish an NGO that would coordinate their approach to village development and innovation. Conceived of and run entirely by Bemni youth, the committee identified leaders for separate "departments." This included one for agriculture whose goal was to encourage a marketized approach to farming that would create economic opportunities for young people and provide incentives to remain in the village. Other scholars have pointed to a tendency for those involved in rural development to reject the term NGO in north India (see Jakimow 2010; Brown 2018). In Bemni, however, young people connected the term NGO with a type of professionalism that they saw emanating from larger towns, or from the state capital of Dehra Dun. The term NGO suggested a level of organization and transparency that did not exist in the local government council.

Young people insisted that their goal, whether working alone as market gardeners or as part of an NGO or microcredit association, was not to change agriculture in the village entirely. They had grown up contributing to the agropastoral system and felt invested in its continuation (see Dyson 2014). Moreover, young people felt passionate about the landscape of Bemni, which they frequently described as "fresh," "clean," and "pure." Rather, they argued that the "traditional" system of farming needed to be

complemented by pockets—or fragments (*tukade*)—of more *neeche* or urban (*shehri*) agricultural production. As in the case of educationally focused young people, these practices pointed to the mixing of the rural–urban that was slightly different from the interplay of rural–urban elements described by scholars working in small towns and periurban areas (Harms 2011; McGee 2014). Rather than trying to construct large-scale urban elements in the village, they focused on developing fragments of locally defined urban practice within a surrounding rural milieu precisely to curb outmigration and sustain rural livelihoods. Moreover, as in the case of educational entrepreneurs, the emphasis of agriculturally focused young people was usually on importing elements of local Uttarakhandi urban practice rather than materials or practices associated with India's metropolitan areas.

Transforming Gendered Practices

Young people's attempts to create fragments of *neeche* or Uttarakhandi town-like practice within Bemni was also evident among a set of ten young women who called themselves "speakers" (*bolniwali*). These young women were between eighteen and thirty years old and had all acquired some education outside the village. They argued that although education and agricultural improvement were important for the future of the village, it was also essential to ensure that young women live in a social environment in which they could meaningfully contribute to public debate.

Women's prominent role in agricultural production and the reproduction of the household economy in rural Uttarakhand has provided them with a greater deal of autonomy vis-à-vis their counterparts in the nearby north Indian plains (see Gururani 2014). This is reflected in women's leadership in major social movements over the past 100 years, including anti-alcohol mobilization in the early twentieth century (Gururani 2014), the Chipko environmental movement of the 1970s (Rangan 2000), and the movement for a separate State of Uttarakhand in the 1990s (Mawdsley 1998). This history of women's work and mobilization provides an important context for young women creating elements of innovative urban practice in Bemni.

Geeta's example is illustrative. Aged twenty-one in 2019, Geeta was from a relatively poor GC family. Having completed senior high school, for two years she had worked at home farming her family's land before enrolling in a BA degree in Lawad. She began to split her time between her small rented room in town and returning to the village to help her parents. She said, "We are poor, and it is hard. I need to prioritize my education but I hate being away from the village. I feel guilty when my parents need my help."

Geeta's self-proclaimed commitment to Bemni went beyond her duty to her family, though. Echoing the sentiments of young people involved in education and agricultural innovation, Geeta said that she was worried about outmigration and whether young people had a future in the village. Unlike many young people, she was adamant that she would always live in a rural place like Bemni. She sought to delay her marriage as long as possible (and the inevitable move to her in-laws' household that was dictated by the patrilocal arranged marriage system). She had thought carefully about what she desired from any future husband, explaining:

> One of my friends says she wants a husband who would take her far away from these remote villages. She wants to live in a city—that's her dream. But I will never leave the area. How can I leave the land where I was born? … In the town, you need money to walk, money for water, whatever you do, you need money. But here in the mountains … it's a free life … a life of choice.

Geeta also highlighted Bemni's tight-knit social life and cultural practices as a reason to stay:

> I don't know what it is, but I just love our customs [*rivaja*]. I always ask my mother to teach me our Garhwali folk songs and stories—we shouldn't lose these things just because of listening to our phones. I love how we work together in the forest, for a *puja* [religious ceremony] or for our weddings. The work is hard, but we are together. I don't want to leave that.

At the same time, Geeta said there was much that needed changing in the village. She was concerned about the status of women and worried that growing wealth inequalities meant that some families were excluded from opportunities for education or health care. As a young woman, though, she said she had little voice. "It's hard to speak up about these things," she said, "but I want to be a speaker [*bolniwali*]."

In early 2017, when Geeta was nineteen years old and just finishing Class 12, she seized an opportunity to develop this role. She and Jane attended a

gathering of the Mahila Mangal Dal, a recently established village women's group that addressed a variety of social issues. That day, thirty or so women had arranged to clear out a blocked drain at the village's central water source. It was a disgusting job that made everyone retch as we waded knee-deep through putrid mud. After three hours of grueling work, though, the women assembled in high spirits. Geeta stood with her friends as she listened to a handful of speeches made by the elected leader of the Mahila Mangal Dal and other prominent women. Although aiming to be motivational, these middle-aged women were self-conscious and unaccustomed to the attention, and their words often faltered. Suddenly, and to everyone's surprise, Geeta broke away from the teenage girls and strode to the front of the group. She had never spoken publicly before, but she launched into an improvised presentation on attitudes toward women in the village. For a full ten minutes, Geeta spoke with passion, fluency, and confidence. During part of her speech, she said:

> It is not right that women in the village are told to remain silent. We need to make our voices heard. We are not simply future daughters-in-law. Our lives are not just preparations for our husbands' households [*susral*]. We are already participating in the life of the village. Girls like me should stand up and speak.

The group sat in stunned silence before erupting in delighted applause at the end, as Geeta rushed back to her friends, resuming her more usual shy demeanor. For several days, women talked not just about Geeta's accomplished performance but also about how the wisdom of her words had belied her age.

The following week, as Geeta returned from school, she explained that she had not even planned to go to the gathering and definitely had not envisaged speaking but that something had taken hold of her. When asked about the inspiration for her speech, Geeta said she had been thinking about these issues for a long time but did not know how to express them. She said she had seen women speak out on television, but she had also witnessed accomplished speakers from the town when they came for political rallies or women health workers who visited the village from Lawad or Gopeshwar. It is relatively rare for women to give public speeches in rural areas, and so Geeta and many others associated a woman speaking stridently with an aspect of urban practice. Geeta referred to these speakers as "town women" (using the word *shehri*). In this case, Geeta did not distinguish between women from metropolitan areas and those from *pahari* (mountain) towns.

Geeta went on to speak at many other public events over the next two years. She said that she was not trying to effect dramatic change in the village's social makeup. Instead, she regularly stressed the importance of nurturing aspects of Bemni's social structure—for example, the close working relationships between households founded on histories of labor sharing—and cultural practices, including collectively celebrated religious festivals. She also said that some aspects of gender relations in Bemni were better than in Lawad. Reflecting the history of relative autonomy enjoyed by women in rural Uttarakhand (see Gururani 2014), Geeta commented that women could move around public space in the village more freely, attend festivals, and participate in most forms of work. Geeta nevertheless felt that "speaking up" was an area where women with urban knowledge could contribute to positive change in Bemni.

Paralleling the examples of the educational entrepreneurs and NGO workers, Geeta reflected explicitly on the performative dimension of being a speaker. She said, "Quite often, it hardly matters what I'm saying. I'll be standing in front of a lot of people in the village or sometimes in neighboring villages, but I don't even mind if I make a mistake. Just standing straight and speaking—that's the whole point." Paralleling the narratives of women involved in antidam protests in Uttarakhand discussed by Drew (2014), Geeta also stressed the importance of serving as a role model and building a critical mass. She said, "When others see me, they also pick up the idea."

In 2019, Geeta had become sufficiently confident as a speaker to launch a bid to obtain a seat in the subdistrict council, the first time an unmarried young woman in Bemni had sought election. Geeta was unsuccessful, though; villagers had worried that she would need to abandon the role if her marriage was arranged (with the implication that she would move to her in-laws' village). Instead, they chose an already married opponent who was both shy and significantly less educated but whose husband had good political connections. Although disappointed, Geeta said that it had been a valuable learning experience and an opportunity to demonstrate ambition to others in Bemni.

This was not the only time that Geeta faced efforts to patronize her, however. Her college teacher

in Lawad, having heard about her growing reputation, asked her to make a speech and sing a song. While she was speaking, he interrupted her: "That's excellent, but please now can you sing?" Geeta recalled proudly how she told her teacher, "I'll sing when I've finished speaking." Geeta added, "That way I let my teacher know that my speech was important."

Geeta's case illuminates aspects of speakers' activities more broadly. Nine other young women in Bemni—five unmarried and four married—had drawn on experience of urban practice to challenge people's expectations through developing roles as speakers. We witnessed many of these young women express themselves in situations where they were not expected to speak. As in Geeta's case, they often used these opportunities to discuss inequality and the need for greater government action to counter poverty in the region. They also commonly spoke of girls' education and tried to persuade their peers and younger girls to obtain better information about health care, women's representation in local politics, or their constitutional rights.

Each of these women reflected on her public speaking as being both important for her own development and as a contribution to broader change. By persuasively demonstrating the capacity of unmarried young women to speak up in front of older women and men, they created settings that they explicitly linked to an urban or *shehri* milieu. As in the case of young educational and agricultural entrepreneurs in Bemni, these speakers used particular fragments of locally defined urban behavior in an attempt to change practices in the village.

At first blush, these points appear to distinguish our study from accounts of rural and urban women's involvement in environmental protests in Uttarakhand in the 1970s and the movement for a separate state in the 1990s. During these movements, women tended to emphasize the value and importance of the rural over what was considered urban, modern, and development (see Rangan 2000; Gururani 2014). Yet, as Mawdsley (1998) noted, several women involved in both the Chipko movement and movement for a separate state referred to the importance of elements of the urban when advancing their political cause; for example, through the focus on acquiring government jobs or development infrastructure (see also Drew 2014). Mawdsley's (1998) account of the separate state movement in the 1990s could be framed as an example of a politics of "selective urbanism."

These points of congruence between former women's movements and young women in Bemni reveal how both sets of women championed the rural while also engaging in forms of selective urbanism. Young women in Bemni stressed that many aspects of the village's social landscape were positive in terms of gender relations, highlighting the value of some rural practices. For example, young women made a distinction between Bemni—where they could move about relatively freely—and towns such as Lawad and Gopeshwar, where they risked encountering "eve-teasing" (a term that refers to sexual harassment) or men misusing alcohol. Those with experience of studying in small towns said it was often difficult for young women to attend cultural festivals in urban centers, partly because of the threat of harassment. Nevertheless, young women argued that they could still learn from gender relations in these towns by emulating how women "speak up" in meetings and other public settings.

Others in Bemni, however, sometimes criticized young women's behavior. Several people said that young women were "getting ahead of themselves" or spoke of a decline in young women's work ethic, a trend that they felt was linked to the rise of urban-style (*shehri*) young women in the village (see also Ramamurthy 2008). In some cases, older men simply ignored young women's behavior or regarded it as "harmless." Speakers persisted, however; they argued that their actions were shifting young women's capacity to contribute to village life.

Conclusions

There is now a rich literature within geography and related disciplines on how particular spaces—such as suburbs, the fringes of cities, and small towns—blend elements of the rural and urban. Much of this literature focuses on land use, architectural forms, and economic processes (McGee 2014). Our study has concentrated instead on the symbolic dimensions of how agency and ideas of urbanism and rurality intersect (see also Deuchar 2019; Gergan and Smith 2020). We have examined how young people selected elements of their experience in towns and cities and incorporated them in a rural setting. They did this for very strategic reasons, to develop the economic and social viability of the

village as a means of stemming the growing exodus of young people from Bemni.

Other scholars have discussed how visions of the rural and urban are produced, contested, and transformed in different sites across the world (Roy 2016; Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Gergan and Smith 2020). These studies tend to take urban areas as their starting point. Here we examine how ideas of the urban and rural are mobilized in a place that remains predominantly rural. We have highlighted how a set of young people from their late teens to their early thirties in Bemni village are using their understanding and experience of urban areas not only to improve their own standing, as argued by Deuchar (2019), but to ensure the future survival of their village.

Youth action in Bemni had some broadly positive effects. It improved some people's access to education, generated new ideas about farming, and had a generally positive effect on young women's autonomy. Young people adapted urban stylistic practices—such as a school opening ceremony or public speaking—to a rural context. Moreover, young women used a particular invocation of urban practice—the notion that unmarried young women can and should speak in public settings—to challenge aspects of local patriarchy. At the same time, young people's urban performances tended to avoid engaging with caste inequalities in the village and aligned broadly with mainstream notions of development (*vikaas*), including notions of the enterprising youth (Gooptu 2013). Young people's action is therefore best understood as a form of cultural production (Willis 1981): Young people imaginatively addressed problems and deficits in the village and sought to create a better future environment locally but in ways shaped by dominant discourses in the region.

Our study also informs the literature on how people in different sites have developed ideas of the rural and urban. We have emphasized the importance of performing urban fragments within rural areas. There are parallels between our account and work on how urban residents have enhanced the livability of towns and cities through deploying specifically rural fragments (Gidwani and Ramamurthy 2018; Deuchar 2019).

Our study also highlights the ambivalent nature of people's perceptions of the urban in the rural (e.g., Cohen 2004; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008; Gupta 2015). They regard some aspects of urbanization as positive, including the opportunity to benefit from new technologies, acquire education, and transform gender roles. Yet they also perceive some aspects of urbanism as harmful; for example, the prevalence of town-based sexual harassment (see also Bentall and Corbridge 1996; Roy 2016). Moreover, young people simultaneously imbue the rural with a range of positive qualities, including high levels of social cohesion and environmental purity.

It follows that young people's cultural productions in Bemni are typically efforts to ensure that the village becomes only "partially urban." The majority of studies of the rural Global South and rural India over the past fifty years have tended to trace how people seek routes out of their village (Ferguson 2007; Newell 2013; Gupta 2015). By contrast, our account highlights the social struggles that young people might employ to remain in their rural area and transfigure it "just enough" for it to be a viable base for future generations. Young people seek to perform elements of the urban in the village. They do not seek to transform the village into a town or hasten their departure for the city but instead hope to combine the advantages of urban practice with the perceived social strength, resources, and freedom of the rural.

In making these points, we have also provided a complement to literature that has problematized the binary of urban and rural (Oswin 2018; Ruddick et al. 2018). People in Bemni do not operate with a singular version of the urban. They differentiate, for example, between the urban metros, often associated with *neeche* (down below) and *pahari* (mountain-based) towns. They also distinguish between relatively large mountainous towns and small market centers. These divisions become relevant as young people perform the urban in the rural; for example, where they choose to imitate district town educational institutions rather than metropolitan schools (see also Gergan and Smith 2020). At the same time, however, urban and rural remain important ideological, social, and aesthetic categories.

Future research on the cultural production of the rural and urban in different sites globally might usefully engage with three dimensions of selective urbanism that we have identified. First, young people chose aspects of urban practice that they regarded as morally, economically, or socially important, while rejecting other practices also considered to be urban

in origin, such as corruption or sexual harassment. Second, young people in Bemni tended to distinguish between a hierarchy of different types of urban settlement when deliberating on what kinds of urban elements they wanted to develop in the village. Third, their actions were selective in the sense that they were not seeking to use a set of practices identified as "of the town" or "of the city" to wholly urbanize the village. Rather, they attempted to ensure that urban performances coexisted with an established set of valued rural practices to ensure viable village futures.

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Notes

1. We have used pseudonyms throughout.
2. Data are from a full survey that we conducted in the village in 2012.
3. We have not changed the names of the district town or the state capital. All other place names are pseudonyms.
4. We use pseudonyms and have changed some details of people's backgrounds to protect their identities.

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