Introduction

In 2003, I used to tag along with 10-year-old Kranti on her daily walk to school in Mohanpur, a predominantly *adivasi* (tribal) rural village in central India.[1] The daughter of a prominent local family, Kranti was a Class 3 pupil at the time. She enjoyed going to school, she told me, mostly for the 'holiday' (*chutti*) from household labour, and because she could hang out with her girlfriends. But she also enjoyed learning and was a very good student. Unlike some of her less capable peers, her teacher reported, she had a 'fine mind' (*bahut hoshiyaar*), and was certainly capable of 'becoming someone'. Indeed, Kranti did harbour aspirations of becoming someone: she wanted to be a teacher. More than anything, she wanted to escape the kind of 'drudgery' that defined the everyday life of her parents and others in this rural community. She understood the importance of schooling in realizing a different future: work hard at your studies, her teacher told her, and you *will* become someone.

Kranti completed her Class 5 in 2005 with top marks, and was eagerly looking forward to going on to secondary school in the neighbouring village. She was determined to study until Class 12 – the minimum required, at the time, to obtain a teaching qualification. As happened to the majority of local children (boys and girls alike), however, her parents deemed her to be sufficiently *shikshit* (educated) and declared that further study beyond Class 5 would be a waste of time. Her parents also had the education of three younger children to worry about, not to mention Kranti's marriage to arrange, and her labour was required at home. Kranti was so disappointed, she told me later, that she cried for days, pleading with her parents to allow her to carry on with her schooling. Not only were her hopes of becoming a teacher extinguished, but the companionship that school provided, along with the few hours of respite from the routines of household labour, were permanently withdrawn. She even begged Guruji, the local schoolteacher, to intervene, but he refused. He'd witnessed this course of action countless

times, and had long since learned that any intervention was futile. 'These people' (*ye log*), he lamented to me at the time, clearly frustrated, 'they are so foolish (*dimag nahin*). They don't understand the importance of education.'

In 2008, I returned to the village for another spell of fieldwork and met up with Kranti again – this time as a 15-year-old bride-to-be. The year before, she had received a respectable marriage proposal from a boy who was studying to be a teacher and who came from a 'good', relatively prosperous family in a village several kilometres away. They were attracted to Kranti not only because she was well trained in domestic tasks, but also because she was in possession of what was considered to be the ideal level of education: Class 5. Kranti's family was very pleased with the proposal and Kranti herself was relieved about her good fortune. While reminiscing with her about her school days, I reminded her about her aspirations to become a schoolteacher. She collapsed into peals of laughter at the memory: she'd obviously been 'quite mad', she told me, at having harboured such lofty dreams in the first place. She now looked pragmatically forward, preparing for her wedding and anticipating a future that would revolve around the demands of a rural livelihood, much like her parents and grandparents before her.

***

During the course of numerous field trips that have spanned two decades, I have come across many Krantis in rural Chhattisgarh: young people whose aspirations for a different kind of future – one with education at its centre, and one that has little in common with the rural lives and opportunities that defined their present – were invariably altered by conditions or constraints beyond their control. While I return to Kranti in later chapters, her story captures some of the key questions that frame this book: what do rural young people aspire for, and how are these aspirations altered in relation to the possibilities of achieving them? What role does school education play in shaping these aspirations, and how is this role governed by broader structural constraints? How is education – and perceptions of 'educational success' – understood and valued locally, and how does this understanding articulate with the livelihood possibilities of rural young people?

This book engages with these questions with reference to ethnographic research carried out over the past two decades in Chhattisgarh, a central Indian state whose 25 million-strong population comprises over one-third of those categorized as *adivasi*, or Scheduled Tribe (ST)[2] – the vast majority of whom live in rural areas and rely on subsistence agriculture for their livelihoods. Situated against the backdrop of the economic liberalization processes initiated throughout India in the early 1990s – processes that have propelled India's ascension to the ranks of global economic powerhouse

and resulted in dramatic increases in wealth and opportunity especially amongst the country's urban middle classes (cf. Brosius 2010; Gupta and Sivaramakrishnan 2011) – the book turns its attention to those who have met with comparatively little of the prosperity that is associated with these reforms: namely, rural-dwelling *adivasis*[3] who are classified as 'BPL' (living 'below the poverty line'),[4] whose livelihoods continue to be rooted in subsistence agriculture and the sale of forest produce, and whose educational access and attainment, along with the attendant opportunities for upward social mobility, remain governed by their structural positions of marginality. It focuses specifically on the differentiated educational experiences of young people from Mohanpur, a mixed Hindu and Christian *adivasi* village with a population of around 1100 – experiences that are representative of many young people across rural India today.

In Mohanpur, some people regard school education as intrinsically beneficial and acknowledge its instrumental utility in facilitating opportunities for social mobility. Many others, however, consider it to be an expensive and time-consuming means to an end that is not attainable by people like themselves, who lack the requisite forms of capital to translate their educational investment into a viable economic return (cf. Balagopalan 2003; Balagopalan and Subrahmanian 2003; Corbett 2007: 3; Bourdieu 1984, 1990a). These views happen to map onto two prominent discourses that underpin contemporary debates about education: one that regards education as a fundamental social 'good' (see Dreze and Sen 1995; Sen 1999), representing a positive pathway to social mobility and providing substantive opportunities; and one that views education as a tool of questionable utility that reinforces positions of inequality (Levinson and Holland 1996: 1). While there is a large body of research straddling several disciplines that engages with these discourses (cf. Levinson et al. 1996; Morarji 2014), it is not my intention in this monograph to reproduce the familiar refrain that education is a 'contradictory resource', providing valuable skills and bringing about opportunities for some whilst creating impediments and inequalities for others. Rather, in this book, I am interested in how marginalized rural *adivasis* bring their own meaning and understanding to the powerful discourse underpinned by the transformative potential of education, particularly in relation to their aspirations for upward social mobility and within the context of broader social, political and historical conditions and constraints.

As intimated in Kranti's case, the education-based aspirations of rural young people, which are propelled by the potential for a different kind of future, are routinely – and sometimes irreversibly – adjusted in relation to the possibility of achieving them. Such adjustments may be abruptly foisted upon young people by well-meaning parents, whose decisions to

terminate their child's education are based on seemingly sound economic or material grounds: the need for participation in agricultural labour, the prospect of younger children to educate, or anticipated marriage expenses. But such adjustments are also embedded in more entrenched constraints related to the positions of marginality that young people like Kranti continue to occupy in a rapidly liberalizing India: one that is underpinned not only by their *adivasi* status, but also by their gender and religious identity, along with their community's relationship to agricultural and forest land, and the labour and migration practices that historically revolve around these.

In this book we will meet other *adivasi* young people from Mohanpur, some of whom, like Kranti, were initially resistant to the premature termination of their education, along with others who continued to oppose this decision. We will also meet young people who were more favourably disposed to this decision, and those who rejected the promises underpinning schooling's transformative potential altogether. We will encounter young people who carried on with their secondary schooling and beyond, but then struggled to translate their educational capital into viable forms of employment, along with those who managed to use their educational credentials to gain access to the kind of 'substantive goods' promised by school education. Throughout this examination, we will consider the aspirations, choices and trajectories that underpin these varying outcomes and experiences, along with the differentiated ways in which these are mediated by the kind of structural constraints depicted in Kranti's example and shaped by conditions of both material poverty and the poverty of opportunity (cf. Stahl 2015a: 132). In addition to their *adivasi* status, what unites these young people is their comparative rural marginality.

Underpinning all of this is how education is understood locally. What I am most interested in here is the correlation between the transformative discourses associated with education, the impact that these discourses have on marginalized rural young people's aspirations and strategies for social mobility, and the structural constraints that govern the possibility of achieving them. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, local people recognize that education can be potentially transformative in positive ways. But they also acknowledge (and act upon) its limitations, and understand that an investment in education is risky, replete with unpredictable and sometimes detrimental outcomes. In this monograph, we will unpack the varying ways in which this particular 'good' – and the forms of educational success associated with it – is constructed and measured in relation to other forms of localized cultural capital that hold commensurate value. Throughout, the comparative distinctions between Hindus and Christians will be privileged, with ethnographic attention drawn to the important role

that these communal affiliations play in young people's aspirations and educational engagement.

This introduction situates this discussion in relation to the broader theoretical themes that form the basis of analysis throughout the monograph. In the next section, I discuss the idea of education as a social good, focusing on its role in the reproduction of inequality. I then examine the concept of 'aspiration' and its importance in mediating educational engagement and the pursuit of a different kind of future. Following this is a consideration of social mobility and how the mobile capital that is associated with education may be employed for positive gain. This leads to a discussion of the differentiated value attributed to education, which is followed by a consideration of the associated risks that impact on people's valuation of and investment in education. Finally, I introduce the research context and outline the structure and argument of the monograph.

Education as an Unequal 'Social Good'

Understanding Educational Success

As intimated above, education, specifically the knowledge, credentials and status that are acquired and legitimized through formal schooling, is often projected as being intrinsically beneficial (Dreze and Sen 1995; Sen 1999).[5] Considered by scholars, government agents and development practitioners alike to be a 'commonplace' assumption (Jeffery 2005: 15), this 'social good' discourse has played a key role in the Indian colonial state's 'civilizing process' (see Fischer-Tiné and Mann 2004; Bajpai 2006), and continues to form an integral part of the post-colonial rhetoric surrounding development and nation-building (Chopra and Jeffery 2005). Routinely hailed as a panacea for the country's 'backward' rural population, it not only arms individuals with the skills that are deemed necessary to engage with the modern nation-state and increasingly globalized economy; it also enhances overall human development by eradicating illiteracy, reducing social inequalities, and lowering fertility and mortality rates (Chopra and Jeffery 2005; Kumar 1994). The assumptions underpinning these powerful discourses have been reinforced by a neoliberal rhetoric that extols schooling as the preeminent vehicle for the mobilization of heightened aspirations (Gooptu 2013: 8–9) and for the advancement of human capital, meritocratic talent and hard work, and economic benefit (cf. Stahl 2015a: 28). Lack of education, or 'school-less-ness' (Jayaraj and Subramanian 2007: 188), in turn, is typically linked to some form of deprivation or failure, leading to diminished livelihood opportuni-

ties, increased instances of child mortality and child labour, and a host of other detrimental outcomes invariably related to the perpetuation of poverty, different forms of inequality, and aspiration failure.[6]

In Chapter 1, I engage in a more extended discussion on the central role played by education in India's colonial and post-colonial history. I also examine further how education has assumed the status of a fundamental 'social good', and consider how these discourses have been given renewed emphasis in the wake of the liberalization of India's economy, which has led to major shifts in India's education policy (see Chakravarti 2016: 42–43; cf. Sancho 2015) and helped to propel India's 2010 Right to Education (RTE) Act, making primary education compulsory and universal. Here, it is important to point out that these powerful discourses are not unfamiliar to local people, who participate actively in their circulation. School education, for example, is taken to be a 'good thing' by most villagers, who are inclined to agree with assumptions surrounding its transformative potential. They are aware that the longer their children remain in education, the better their chances for successfully accessing opportunities (like salaried employment, or *naukari*) for a better future, and they solemnly acknowledge the 'truth' (*sac*) behind the more lofty platitudes celebrating the positive correlation between education, improvement (*sudharna*) and development (*vikaas*).

Where local people's perspectives tend to diverge is in relation to how these discourses articulate with the realities of their present lives and abilities to access these opportunities. While attributing to schooling a fundamentally positive value, for example, local people also recognize that education is not a straightforward good accompanied by the guarantees of a better future; to the contrary, they understand that an investment in (especially secondary) school education can be risky, fraught with unpredictable and sometimes detrimental outcomes. In this regard, the cessation of a young person's schooling after what is deemed to be an appropriate amount of education may represent a more practical and strategic educational alternative. The decision to withdraw Kranti from school education after completion of Class 5 is an example of this. Criticized by her teacher as an irresponsible course of action that permanently curtailed access to the kind of 'substantive opportunities' discussed by Sen and others, this decision represented what the majority of local people consider to be the most sensible course of action which led, ultimately, to the acquisition of an extremely valuable good: a respectable marriage proposal and secure future. Allowing her to carry on to secondary school would have jeopardized this outcome.

This sort of educational return is routinely characterized in the literature as being of the more 'marginal' sort (Maddox 2010), taking a back seat

to the more economically viable outcomes (namely, salaried employment) that are routinely associated with educational success. Such discourses underscore the important role played by gender in determining access to education and strategizing about an appropriate level of schooling in rural Indian contexts, and I return to these discussions later on. At this stage, it is important to note that while gender is undoubtedly significant, it is not the central analytical focus of this monograph – owing in part to the considerable scholarly attention that the study of gender in India has received over the past few decades (for a recent overview, see Singh and Sinha 2024; cf. Purkayastha et al. 2003), particularly in relation to discussions about education (see Manjrekar 2021; Chopra and Jeffery 2005). [7] Instead, my analysis centres on the shared experiences and perspectives of local youth and how these are shaped by broader factors such as poverty, ethno-communal identities (Hindus and Christians), and other influences that collectively impact on the educational aspirations of marginalized rural young people. Although not explicitly framed as such, this approach is inherently intersectional, addressing the complex interplay of these multiple factors.

The way in which the idea of 'educational success' is valued and measured is of course critical to this analysis. Following Bourdieu (1989; cf. Lareau and Weininger 2003: 582), there are two dimensions by which educational success may be measured locally. In the first, educational success takes on a kind of 'technical competence' (Bourdieu 1989: 119) that is represented by the qualifications or certificates that denote the acquisition of a particular level of knowledge or pass mark. In Mohanpur, such credentials demonstrate proof of 'educated knowledge' (*sikshit gyan*) – the kind of abilities that are discussed in relation to general 'cleverness' (*hoshiyaar*) – and represent a potentially useful form of cultural capital that is wheeled out for prospective employers or other gatekeepers who have access to potential gains (e.g. recruitment officers for government training schemes, college admissions officials, prospective employers, etc.).

Alongside this sort of tangible 'proof' of technical competence, educational success has a symbolic dimension and attests to a kind of 'social competence' (Bourdieu 1989: 119) that takes the form of enhanced status or social positioning. This form of cultural capital is accompanied by a corresponding capacity for an individual to set herself apart from others, in terms of speech, comportment or esteem (cf. Lareau and Weininger 2003: 581). Locally, this sort of competence is used in negotiations around, for example, a good marriage proposal, or in the course of engagement with those in positions of authority. While these two dimensions cannot be easily disentangled, one or the other invariably take precedence. In Kranti's case, for example, educational success took on a more symbolic dimension: the completion of Class 5 ensured her status as an adequately

'educated girl' (*shikshit ladaki*) and more or less guaranteed a good marriage proposal.

Educational Value and the Reproduction of Inequality

Any examination of the differentiated value attributed to education, especially in relation to aspiration and social mobility, would be incomplete without consideration of the role played by different forms of capital (cf. Jeffrey et al. 2008; Elliott 1997). Bourdieu's theoretical approach is again useful here, particularly in terms of understanding the kinds of capital that impact on young people's ability to get ahead and the structures of inequality that prevent them from doing so. Drawing upon personal experience and intellectual observations of French society, Bourdieu provided a set of conceptual tools for understanding the different ways in which educational capital is valued and acted upon (see Bourdieu 1974, 1984, 1990a). He was specifically interested in educational access, differences and outcomes, and in how these correlated with social status and class. Moving beyond Marxist ideas of class and 'capital' that gave prominence to material and economic forms of wealth, Bourdieu foregrounded the importance of social capital – the instrumentally useful relationships, connections and networks – along with the educational qualifications and other kinds of cultural competences that confer social distinction in the perpetuation of social inequalities (cf. Calhoun et al. 1993). These different kinds of capital bestow important advantages that facilitate access to and successful engagement with education and other valuable livelihood options. One of the most important forms of (social) capital for marginalized *adivasis* where I carried out my fieldwork in rural Chhattisgarh is the Church, an issue that I shall explore further in Chapter 45.

By acknowledging the strong correlation between education and access to different forms of capital, Bourdieu has provided a constructive means for theorizing how school education not only serves as a purportedly egalitarian arena that equalizes individual chances for successful mobility, but also represents a means by which social inequalities and hierarchies are reinforced and legitimized: a vehicle, in other words, through which opportunities for enhanced livelihood options are both enabled and constrained (cf. Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Kusserow 2004; MacLeod 2009; Stahl 2015a). Here, education is an example of what Bourdieu conceptualizes as a 'social field': a space where individuals and groups compete for valuable forms of capital (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Success in any given field depends not only on the possession of necessary forms of capital but also on familiarity

and ability to navigate the field's tacit rules and norms: what Bourdieu (1990a: 66) calls a 'feel for the game', which tends to align with the habitus of dominant social groups.[8] As such, while education is framed as a levelling mechanism that promotes equality, like other fields it is skewed in favour of those more advantaged groups whose possession of superior forms of capital and knowledge best match the expectations of the field – thereby legitimizing social hierarchies and reproducing inequalities.

Bourdieu's work, by extension, implies that marginalized people, given their purportedly inferior forms of capital and lack of know-how within education and other social fields, will remain decidedly disadvantaged in comparison with more dominant social groups, reproducing themselves and occupying the same social position as the generation before them. Underpinning debates surrounding the transformative potential of education, in other words, is the role that education plays in maintaining – rather than breaking down – differentiations among different social groups.

In this respect, Bourdieu's work is firmly situated alongside other 'social reproduction' theorists (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Willis 1977; cf. Kusserow 2004; MacLeod 2009), who view school education not as an arena that ostensibly equalizes individual chances for successful mobility, but as a vehicle through which aspirations and opportunities for social mobility are further constrained. As Stahl (2015a: 138) has observed, there is an assumption that education – as an instrument of social reproduction – plays a key role in shaping people's choices and future aspirations, along with the resources – the capital – available to them to achieve their goals. This can clearly be seen in India, where there are numerous ways in which more dominant social classes 'prevent the rise of another through its control over education' (Weiner 1991: 189), legitimizing and reinforcing inequalities in the process (see Chapter 1).

In spite of its analytical utility, this discourse has been criticized on at least two important fronts. First, it privileges the category of class over other social categories like gender (Moi 1999; Reay 1995, 1998). While Bourdieu does explore gender relations in some of his work (1977, 1984, 1990), he tends to frame his analysis pre-eminently in terms of the reproduction of class-based cultural power. Notwithstanding this lack of attention to 'gender problematics' (Adkins 2004: 4), theorists have recognized the utility of Bourdieu's theoretical schema – particularly in relation to his 'microtheoretical approach', which demands the incorporation of the most mundane details of everyday life into analyses of social power (Moi 1991: 1091) – and have 'appropriated' (ibid.) or critically extended it to an analysis of gender (see Adkins 2004; Skeggs 2004). In relation to my own work, the important role played by gender in both enabling and curtailing rural *adivasi* young people's engagement with education, and in the dif-

ferentiated ways in which education is imbued with meaning and value, is discussed further in Chapter 1 and will be explored ethnographically in Chapters 2 and 4.

Bourdieu's framework has also been criticized for its emphasis on what is essentially a passive response amongst subordinate groups in relation to the power of more dominant classes, and for downplaying people's agency and the possibility of change (see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1993; Reed-Danahay 2005). In response to this more 'deterministic' approach to social reproduction, scholars like Paul Willis (1977) draw attention to young people's agency and the different strategies they employed to challenge and transform dominant cultural norms. Acknowledging the significance of structural constraints in relation to (for example) education and related opportunities for social mobility, Willis (1977) has reminded us that, in order to understand processes of social reproduction, it is not only important to consider how structural forces are mediated by the wider cultural milieu, but also to recognize that individuals possess a degree of agency in the way they construct, negotiate, and act upon their choices (cf. Giroux 1983) – even when such choices ultimately reproduce their class position.[9]

In spite of these criticisms, Bourdieu's framework is useful in understanding how young people's position within existing social hierarchies impacts upon their aspirations, along with their ability to negotiate and engage with broader structural constraints. Such issues will be explored further throughout this monograph.

Aspiring for Elsewhere

In recent years, the concept of aspiration has received increasing scholarly attention. Much of this discourse concerns the relationship between education, aspiration and (upward) social mobility, although specific interest in the idea of young people's aspirations, particularly in respect of education, is growing (cf. Fischer 2014; Davidson 2011; Corbett 2007; Demerath 2009; Stahl 2015a). Within this discourse, aspirations are described as being 'multidimensional and many-faceted' (Ibrahim 2011: 4; Copestake and Camfield 2010) and typically refer to the hopes, desires or ambitions related to the achievement of something (see Ibrahim 2011: 3). They 'define the realm of potential action' (Fischer 2014: 210) and concern the process of envisioning particular notions of the 'good life' (Fischer 2014: xi; cf. Quaglia and Cobb 1996; Bok 2010: 164).

Such attention has been impelled, in part, by Arjun Appadurai's (2004) famous essay on the capacity to aspire, which argues that poorer commu-

nities have a limited capacity to aspire because they lack the resources and social networks that provide access to broader possibilities for an alternative future. Framed as a cultural capacity, Appadurai reminds us that while aspirations are fundamentally related to individual wants, preferences, choices or calculations (2004: 67), they are never simply individual; they are always formed in the 'thick of social life', inevitably embedded within what he terms 'densely local ideas' (2004: 68) – about, for example, marriage, work, friendship, health or leisure. Appadurai, of course, was specifically interested in the role that aspirational capacity played in the reduction of poverty, or the way that aspirations reflected the extent to which poor people feel that they have control over their future, or engage in forward-looking behaviour (Appadurai 2001; see also Ray 2006; Bernard, Taffesse and Dercon, 2008: 8–10; Rao 2010). Unevenly distributed between rich and poor, Appadurai suggests, this 'capacity to aspire' also serves as a kind of navigational capacity that provides a means by which (especially privileged groups) can more easily access possibilities for a different kind of future (cf. 2004: 69). For poorer groups, this capacity is said to be restricted by what Ray (2006: 418; cf Bernard et al. 2008: 7) has termed a formidable 'aspiration gap', or 'the difference between a person's current situation or standard of living, and that which she aspires to'.

Appadurai could perhaps be criticized for not adequately addressing the broader structural conditions (economic inequality, political exclusion) that impede the aspirational capacities of (particularly) the poor, and for placing the burden of change (responsibility for poverty alleviation) on marginalized individuals or communities themselves (see for example Zimmermann 2024). However, it is not my intention here to engage in a lengthy critique of his work, which provides valuable insights into the role that culture plays in shaping and strengthening aspirational capacity. Appadurai's work also links to a larger corpus of research on the social, political and historical structures that have shaped (and sometimes failed to shape) people's desires and pursuits of a better future (Davidson 2011: 6; cf. Bok 2010: 164). Emphasis here is on the tensions between individual aspirations and the conditions and constraints that inform them, such as parents and family background, peers, neighbourhood context, and poverty and socioeconomic status.[10] Such studies also highlight the fact that aspiration formation is a social and structural process, as well as an individual or personal one (see Baker et al. 2014: 526).

The relationship between aspiration and education has become increasingly pronounced within neoliberal discourses that emphasize individual merit, self-improvement and competition.[11] Indeed, according to Brown (2013: 419), 'aspiration is a particular form of neoliberal social hope based around promoting individualized social mobility… and the

acquisition of a better job, more money, more things…' (2013: 426–27). Even Appadurai's 'capacity to aspire' could be seen to resonate with neoliberal ideologies that emphasize individual action over structural change. Here, attention is given to the 'entrepreneurial self' (Stahl 2015a: 29): young people's failure to take up opportunities available to them, or engage productively in activities – like education – that enhance their qualifications and promote social mobility reflects a lack of individual enterprise. Within such discourses, in other words, individual underachievement cannot be blamed on structural inequalities alone, or on social or historical context (cf. Corbett 2016: 274).

Scholarly discussions around this 'aspiration problem' (Stahl 2012: 9) tend to focus on Euro-American educational contexts (e.g. see Davidson 2011). However, such discourses are also applicable to rural India, where seemingly 'underperforming' young people are charged with being unable (or unwilling) to 'aspire appropriately' and therefore unable to align their aspirations with existing educational – and, by extension, economic – opportunities (Corbett 2016: 276; Francis 2006: 193). Notwithstanding the relevance of this 'aspiration problem' in rural Indian contexts, we also saw with the example of Kranti how young people come to reframe their (inappropriate) aspirations as they reconstruct a more viable or acceptable 'future'. I examine this further in the chapters that follow.

But what does this process actually look like amongst *adivasi* youth in Chhattisgarh? What do young people aspire for, and how do they articulate what it means to 'aspire appropriately'? How are their aspirations linked to the possibilities of mobility, and how does education factor into all of this? In thinking about these questions with respect to my research in Chhattisgarh, I have found it is useful to turn to Zipin et al. (2015), who draw on the work of Appadurai (1990, 1999, 2004) and Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to propose different ways in which aspirations may be conditioned. Two of these are particularly relevant here.[12] One, identified as 'habituated aspirations' (Zipin et al. 2015: 233–36), refers to the way in which aspirations are individually constituted within the limits of given social-structural positions. As implied, these are grounded in the 'habitus' and represent 'deeply internalized, latently felt estimations of probable futures' (Zipin et al. 2015: 234; cf. Bourdieu 1990a). Habituated aspirations are affected by various 'deficiencies' or 'embodied disadvantages' that underpin the sense of possibility in respect of what is and is not 'for us' (ibid.; cf. Bourdieu 1990a: 40; Baker et al. 2014: 528). In respect of my own research, I found that Hindu *adivasis* do not aspire for prolonged education, even though most of them agree that education is a 'good thing'; instead, they tend to downplay their children's school-based achievements and question the viability of the possibilities for mobility that are com-

monly associated with school education. One reason for this, I argue, relates to their marginalized subject positions: they know that people 'like them' lack the embodied and other forms of capital required to use their school experience and certificates in accessing the kinds of opportunities that could translate into a viable future livelihood.

The second way in which aspirations may be conditioned has been classified as 'doxic aspirations'. These refer to the dominant discourses about the 'upwardly mobile life chances' (Zipin et al. 2015: 232) and 'worthy' futures (ibid.: 236) to which one might aspire that circulate through the media and are propagated by NGOs and state officials alike. Such discourses might include such 'common sense' notions about education being a 'fundamental social good', or other ideas underpinning assumptions about education's inherent (usually material) benefits. These assumptions, which may seem unquestionable or indeed 'natural' for all to hold (ibid.: 231), often place emphasis on meritocratic principles, equating educational success – particularly the kind of success associated with 'technical competence' (cf. Bourdieu 1989) – with individual 'hard work' and leaving the impression that educational failure or disadvantage is due to a 'poverty of aspiration', or a lack of discipline found within a particular community or amongst a specific set of individuals (ibid.: 232; cf. Goodman and Gregg 2010; Baker et al. 2014). Such messages, underpinned by a neoliberal rhetoric that emphasizes self-improvement and individual achievement, routinely seep into local understandings of both educational success and its opposite, educational failure (cf. Lucey and Reay 2002, cited in Stahl 2015a: 146). In my fieldwork, for example, I found that school teachers repeatedly articulate familiar refrains about what is required to 'become somebody' (*bada admi ban jaate hein*), or to gain some sort of solid employment, or *naukari*. Those *adivasi* young people who aren't committed to educational achievement, who fail their exams or who abandon school education altogether, are often charged with being 'lazy' (*susti*) or admonished, by both teachers and peers who carry on with further schooling, for their 'lack of discipline' (*anusasan nahin*) or inferior 'intelligence' (*dimag nahin*). Locally, responsibility for school failure is also ascribed to students themselves, and families or whole communities are often held responsible for students' failed ambitions, or reproved for their 'lack of understanding' of the importance of education.

Incremental shifts in school enrolment reflect the fact that local people have begun to pay attention to these messages. But local people also recognize their uselessness, particularly in view of the distance between these 'schooled ideals' (Balagopalan 2005) and their everyday lives in a rural Indian village. To be sure, young people in Mohanpur acknowledge how education can help them in navigating their way out of rural livelihoods

(Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014) into a different kind of future, one oriented around some sort of professional employment. But realizing a better future, or 'becoming someone' through 'working hard in school' and gaining educational qualifications, they learn, becomes something of a false promise: existing structural constraints and embodied disadvantages, whilst sometimes concealed, continue to govern, if not scupper, possibilities of educational success. One of the aims of this book is to examine how young people come to hold these seemingly incommensurate perspectives, and to understand how these are then altered in relation to the possibility of achieving the goals behind them.

There is also a sense of futility about the practical possibility of achieving the desired outcome (namely, a job, but also a good marriage) which drives young people to alter – or abandon – their aspirations altogether. For example, young people's education-related aspirations often entail out-migration, which may not be feasible or desirable for all (Ansell 2004; Morrow 2013). Research in Chhattisgarh and elsewhere in India (see Sancho 2015 and 2013; Lukose 2009; Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008) also demonstrates that increased levels of education do not necessarily correspond to gainful employment. This is due, in part, to the growing number of young people with educational credentials in relation to the availability of jobs, resulting in high rates of 'educated unemployment' (Jeffrey 2009; Sharma 2014). This scenario, of course, is not unique to India; across the globe can be found examples of educated young people, outnumbering existing opportunities for employment (cf. Brown 2013; Brown et al. 2010; Demerath 1999; Broadfoot 1993, 1997). Related to this phenomenon, Zipin et al. (2015: 230) note how one of the main consequences of the 'massification' of education is that it 'generates too many people with educational credentials for jobs which become correspondingly more competitive and difficult to secure'. This structural inability within the economy to deliver on what Brown (2013: 683) calls the 'opportunity bargain' has led to a saturation of the labour market, as young people seek to use education to differentiate themselves from others. In this respect, when education does not live up to its transformative potential and produce the promised returns, and given the structural obstacles that thwart even the most reasonable strategies for pursuing a different kind of future (see Zipin et al. 2015: 227–28), 'aspiration raising', which is inextricably linked to neoliberal discourses underpinning education, may be considered a cruel experience (see Berlant 2011).

This links, finally, to what has come to be known as the 'adaptive preferences' problem. First introduced by Elster (1982), this concept was later developed by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) to refer to the way that people adapt to adverse circumstances (cf. Teschl and Comim 2005;

Qizilbash 2006). In the present context, it pertains to the ways in which people's education-based aspirations are adjusted in relation to existing structural conditions and constraints. As Clark (2009: 23) observes, people's aspirations are malleable, and the process of adjusting aspirations to the possibilities of achieving them normally occurs in two different ways. The first, which is most routinely invoked in the development studies literature, is the 'downward' adjustment, which reflects disadvantaged circumstances or, more gravely, the lack of knowledge or ability to acquire the necessary information to make informed choices in the first place. The second way is through an 'upward' adjustment, which involves an alteration of aspirations upwards to account for new possibilities and opportunities for social mobility.

In my research, young people's aspirations for upward social mobility routinely go beyond the possibility of achieving them, and I try to unpack some of the reasons for this in the chapters that follow. But I am also interested in how such aspirations are transformed – or (re)adjusted – in relation to the possibilities of achieving them. Processes of 'downward adjustment' have historically been more common locally, particularly at the conclusion of primary school, when young people are withdrawn or fail to advance into secondary school. Previous aspirations to become a teacher or policeman, for example, tend to be readjusted to more realistic aims. As we shall see, there are also instances – gradually increasing, especially amongst Christians – where aspirations are adjusted upward.

Education and Social Mobility

The pursuit of upward social mobility is constituted by processes that often involve significant shifts in *adivasi* young people's social and spatial locations. Behind this pursuit might be found multiple aspirations, which are invariably oriented around the desire for a different kind of future, of the sort discussed above: economic prosperity, an increase in livelihood choices, or simply enhanced social status, to name a few. While these kinds of aspirations might be held in common by rural *adivasi* youth, the possibilities for social mobility are clearly not attainable for all. Understanding the reasons for the differentiated success in pursuit of social mobility, particularly in respect of educational aspirations and attainment, is one of the aims of this monograph.

The study of social mobility has been a classical theme within sociology since De Tocqueville, Marx, Weber and Sorokin (cf. Vermeulen 2000). Since the 1960s, however, research into social mobility has been dominated by statistical and economic approaches, with analytical focus on

patterns of mobility across social classes and communities, and on intergenerational shifts in occupational and educational achievements. The survey method has played a crucial role in social mobility research (see Strauss 1971; Bertaux and Thompson 1997; cf. Sorokin 1927), for example in relation to how patterns of mobility and migration compare both within and across social classes and communities. However, this method has been criticized on a number of counts, including its inherent male bias, which stems from a focus on the transgenerational occupations of (especially) fathers and sons (Vermeulen 2000: 7; see also Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). Moreover, this method neither accounts for the individual, family, and group decisions concerning particular pathways of social mobility, nor gives attention to the complex social or historical contexts within which such decisions are embedded (cf. Miller 1955; Blau and Duncan 1967; Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Rao 2010a). Consequently, consideration of young people's aspirations, choices, and experiences, and the way in which these are embedded within family and local contexts, and governed by broader historical contingencies, has been widely neglected.

Qualitative approaches are being employed in response to such criticisms, and increasing attention is being placed on the structural and social limitations that impact upon people's aspirations in their engagement with processes of social mobility. These typically take the form of 'case studies' of individual life stories or family histories (see for example Bertaux and Thompson 1997; Benei 2010). Processes of social mobility are also receiving increasing attention within the anthropology of migration research (Olwig and Sørensen 2002; Larsen et al. 2006; Vertovec 2007; see also Brettell 2000; Foner 2000). However, this research neglects the fact that such processes may encompass a variety of educational strategies related to the acquisition of prestige or social status, or be constructed in diverse, culturally prescribed ways, and may not simply have geographical or spatial movement as its aim. With few recent exceptions (e.g. Osella and Osella 2000; Chopra and Jeffery 2005; Jeffrey, Jeffery and Jeffery 2008; Lukose 2009; Jeffrey 2010; Maddox 2010; Rao 2010b; Sancho 2015), anthropological attention to the relationship between education, aspiration and processes of social mobility, or to how this relationship is constituted locally, remains limited. This book responds to these lacunae by privileging the perspectives and experiences of young people and their families, and by highlighting the broader social, historical, and structural constraints that mediate these.

In contrast with these specific lacunae, existing research reveals that the impact of education on processes of upward social mobility has been very pronounced in different contexts, at times serving as the principal pathway to an alternative and more desirable livelihood (cf. van

Niekirk 2000: 188; see also Neelsen 1975; Vermeulen and Perlmann 2000; Vermeulen and Venema 2000; cf. Rao 2010a; Crivello 2015; Post-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014). As Jeffrey (2010: 10) observes, since 1970, substantial numbers of (especially) lower middle classes in Asia, Africa and Latin America have looked to formal schooling as a vehicle for social mobility, having been exposed via this education, or through the media or development institutions, to images of modernity and 'progress' through education and the possibility of entry into salaried employment. In relation to this, Corbett (2007a), who explores the relationship between school education and 'outmigration' in a Canadian coastal community, holds that the underlying discourse around school-based education (particularly secondary or tertiary education) is intrinsically mobility oriented (2007a: 119). In this sense, education represents a 'link to elsewhere' (2007a: 119), both socially and spatially: a bridge to other places and possibilities (cf. Lucas 1971: 368). Within this 'mobility imperative' (Corbett 2007b), education, or the credentials, certificates or other forms of symbolic capital associated with formal schooling, may be construed as a kind of 'mobile capital' (Corbett 2007a: 29; cf. Osella and Osella 2000) that can be deployed in the aspiration for social mobility.[13] This view resonates with the 'substantive benefits' discourse which, with its infusion of neoliberal rhetoric that equates education with the augmentation of human capital, focuses on the instrumental utility of education in 'adding value' (Gordon 1991: 44) and facilitating future economic returns and opportunities for young people's social mobility.

But how are the putative returns associated with school education supposed to be obtained? And how are these then translated into viable strategies for social mobility, particularly for those in positions of marginality? The idea that education represents a positive pathway toward a different kind of future, or that the mobile capital that is associated with education may be employed for positive gain, is not always as straightforward as proponents of this discourse might suggest (see Dreze and Sen 1995). In my research, for example, I found that prolonged educational engagement can actually undermine the very advantages it is meant to impart, such as in situations when 'too much schooling' – an ongoing concern amongst *adivasis* in rural India – is thought to interfere with young people's future prospects (cf. Demerath 1999; Corbett 2007a). Furthermore, while education may create bridges that lead to alternative futures, it can also threaten – or represent a rejection of – established ties to kin and community. According to Corbett (2007b: 772), this sort of threat is particularly notable in rural communities, where attachment to place is more tightly bound to both family and traditional forms of economic activity.

Social theorists like Giddens (1990) have long pointed out how the idea of the fluid movement of bodies, ideas and goods across time and place is fundamental to modernity (cf. Corbett 2007b: 772). Because of its particular 'mobility imperative', school education – perhaps more than any modern institution – has the potential to reposition young people across a variety of social and geographical spaces, thereby 'disembedding' (cf. Giddens 1990: 21–29) them from traditional affinities and attachments that are valued in a rural context, as they aspire for elsewhere (cf. Corbett 2007b: 772; Morarji 2014: 186). In the process, the correlation between education and social mobility away from the village is reaffirmed, the 'rural' is projected as 'backward', and the pursuit of (usually) urban modernity is privileged over less desirable village livelihoods (cf. Morarji 2014: 176).

If we accept, then, that education, along with the substantive benefits that it putatively provides, represents a powerful vehicle that facilitates movement along positive pathways of mobility, then we also have to recognize that this movement can have unpredictable and sometimes detrimental outcomes.

Valuing Education

The pursuit of social mobility – through, for example, an investment in education – is propelled not only by young people's aspirations, but also by locally prescribed notions of value (cf. Appadurai 2013: 290), and particularly by the value attributed to education. But how is the value of education, as a form of local cultural capital, measured? In what way is the value attributed to education commensurate to other forms of locally-valued capital, and how does this differ between individuals and communities? These kinds of questions lie at the heart of this book, for the way in which education is valued fundamentally informs people's decisions about whether to invest in it or not.

As Graeber (2013: 219–20) has observed, questions of 'value' continue to underpin 'just about every important theoretical debate' within anthropology. While anthropologists have utilized this term since the inception of the discipline, few have attempted to define it theoretically.[14] There has been a resurgence in interest in this concept over the past decade or so, but those who have attempted to engage explicitly with the meaning of value continue to comment on its 'elusive' or 'contentious and intractable' nature (Thomas 1991: 30; Beckert and Aspers 2011; Otto and Willerslev 2013a, 2013b; cf. Graeber 2001), or on how it means many different things, depending on whether one is referring to matters related to ethics or eco-

nomics, or to broader notions of the 'good life' (cf. Otto and Willerslev 2013a; Robbins 2013; Robbins and Sommerschuh (2016) 2023). It is not my intention to engage substantively with these traditions, nor to provide a definitive account of this concept. It will, however, be useful to outline, briefly, what I mean by this term, in order to understand the multitude of ways in which education is evaluated and acted upon, locally, as a strategy for gaining access to important opportunities for social mobility.

At its simplest, value refers to those things defined as 'good' or desirable in a particular social group or society. It is about what is important in life, and about the best means to achieve this (cf. Fischer 2014). But the concept of 'value' also refers to the creation of something within processes of exchange (Otto and Willerslev 2013a), or to the potential profitability, economic return or 'benefits or virtues of a commodity for sale on the market' (Graeber 2013: 224; cf. Demerath 1999; cf. Appadurai 1986). These two sets of ideas are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive, and for the purpose of this ethnographic analysis, I argue that value is about both 'meaning and measure' (Eiss and Pedersen 2002: 283), contingent on the particular places and practices within which it is embedded (cf. Dumont 2013). To state the obvious, then, values are connected to desires for certain things (goods or services) that somehow influence the choices people make. They are measured by how much people are willing to give up or sacrifice to obtain them (cf. Otto and Willerslev 2013a: 5; Kluckhohn 1951a: 395; Graeber 2001: 1–3; cf. Beckert and Aspers 2011: 8, 14),[15] and they cannot be understood without taking account of the context within which they are situated.[16]

Framing this discussion in the context of my research, it is clear that education is something that is valued differently by different people and communities. While there is an inherent, somewhat abstract value or ideological value (cf. Dumont 2013) attached to education in the form of its 'social good' or 'transformative potential', which is ascribed by the state, by the development industry, and by other powerful organizations that operate locally, like the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization involved in education and social outreach, or the Church (see below), this lies in tension with how education is valued locally – where the 'good' that underpins it is directly linked to people's expectation of some sort of measurable, fairly imminent return.[17] The way in which education is valued locally is also linked to how much time and money people are willing (or able, or expected) to sacrifice – or risk – in order to obtain it. One of the principal objectives of this book is to unpack these tensions.

While the economic literature on educational returns (Bils and Klenow 2000; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos 2004; Trostel 2005; Dickson

and Harmon 2011; Gunderson and Oreopolous 2020) also tends to highlight employment (or occupational mobility) as the obvious justification for educational investment, anthropologists have pointed out that educational 'returns' may not be so easily observed: in other words, they may not be reducible to income or monetary exchanges alone, particularly in contexts of poverty (see Stambach 1998). In relation to education in Bangladesh, for example, Maddox (2010: 213) emphasizes the more 'marginal' returns or 'non-monetary' benefits which, whilst holding inherent economic value, may be difficult to quantify, such as social resilience and enhanced self-confidence and life-management skills. To this, one could add returns that take the form of a better marriage proposal or improved social status, or a reorientation of power between social groups. With respect to schooling in East Africa, Stambach (1998: 6) also highlights how the considerations that feature in her informants' decisions about whether to invest in schooling are motivated by different values that are not reducible to potential income or economic returns alone. Instead, an economic valuation of education includes the possibility that schooling may yield a more 'marginal' kind of return, related, for example, to the social status or standing of the individual or social group (ibid.).

Notwithstanding the importance of these sorts of returns, the paramount value of education in rural Chhattisgarh lies in the possibility of economic gain, or its monetary exchange potential. The importance of this sort of exchange potential, which is related to processes whereby education can be converted into different forms of capital, has been noted in other ethnographic work on the valuation of education (see for example Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014; Demerath 1999; Corbett 2007a; Stambach 1998; Skeggs 2004). It is also hinted at by Dreze and Sen (1995) and Sen (1999), in their discussions of the way in which education facilitates social mobility by providing fundamental opportunities. In such discussions, education assumes a kind of commodity status: a valuable good or form of capital whose utility or potential profitability is manifested, in the first instance, in the form of pass marks or degree certificates, which may then be utilized in exchange for a return of greater social significance.[18] Locally, the most desirable return takes the form of *naukari*: salaried employment, which will provide future economic security for the household.

It would of course be a mistake to isolate the exchange value attributed to education from the way in which it is situated in relation to traditional livelihood practices, and in Chapter 3, I shall examine how the value of education is very much governed by its position in the context of locally relevant land, labour and migration histories (cf. Dumont 2013). In this respect, education can also be viewed in terms of its 'positional' performance, a type of value proposed by Beckert (2011: 106–109) that

describes the capability or potential that a particular good has to impact on an individual's social position. As Beckert (2011: 108–109) explains, for the good – here, education – to have value, it must also be viewed as something that 'makes a difference' for the individual through its (potential) performance.[19] With respect to the difference that education can make to a young person in rural India, this might refer to the individual's acquisition of employment, or to his or her social status, particularly in relation to the ability to attract a more suitable spouse. In other words, the value assigned to a particular good does not depend on its 'commodity potential' alone, but on its capability to position its owner (or the household, or the community) into a more desirable social place.

While ideas about what constitutes a desirable social place will obviously differ between individuals and between social groups and remain firmly connected to particular historical and social contingencies, they share a concern with what is considered to be really meaningful in life (Fischer 2014: 12). One of the objectives of this book is to examine the role that education has in relation to such ideas. Whether valued in the first instance for the way it might position a particular person in relation to the broader group, or for its commodity potential, as a particular kind of good whose value rests in the possibility to transform the lives of those who possess it, education is, ultimately, a 'future value' (Beckert and Aspers 2011: 26; cf. Posti-Ahokas and Palojoki 2014: 664). And local people are aware that an investment in this future value – by meeting the economic and opportunity costs of their children's schooling – is fraught with different social, temporal or economic risks, simply because the promised benefits (or returns) may not weigh up against the costs involved.

The Risk of Education

But how are education-related risks articulated or manifested locally, and how do these impact upon people's valuation of (and investment in) education? While a more ethnographically-grounded discussion of these questions will take place in Chapter 4, at this stage it will be helpful to provide some analytical background to the concept of 'risk'.

'Risk' is originally an economic category, which took account of the likelihood of losses and gains in relation to profit maximization (Douglas 1992: 23). Emerging at the end of the seventeenth century, the concept of risk is commonly defined in mathematical terms as the statistical probability that quantifies the chance of an event occurring, combined with the losses or gains, the successes and failures, which might be entailed (see Douglas 1992: 23; Boholm 2003: 160–61; Reith 2008: 56–58). It was

only in the 1980s–1990s that this concept began to receive wider analytical attention from social theorists like Ulrich Beck (1992) and Anthony Giddens (1991), who were interested in the way in which modern society deals with or responds to different hazards and risks brought on by processes of modernization. With particular relevance to industrialized societies that have undergone significant degrees of neoliberalization (cf. Demerath 2013: 187), this broader 'risk society' discourse tends to characterize risk as a 'global', totalizing and uniform phenomenon that has the same characteristics in all spheres (cf. Dean 1999: 136). With its focus on large-scale, societal phenomena – e.g. insurance, death, environmental disaster – then, this discourse neglects the everyday experiences and perspectives of the individual.

In response to this, what I am most interested in is what has been termed the 'cultural theory of risk', originating around the same time in the work of Mary Douglas and Aaron Wildavsky (1983), which emphasizes the more localized, socially constructed nature of risk. Those who follow this framework are interested in understanding why different societies view risks differently (cf. Caplan 2000: 12), and (most importantly) the ways in which risk is socially and historically embedded (see Boholm 2003: 164). My intention is to examine how these ideas can be extended to the experience of individual young people.

Key for both frameworks is the way in which the concept of risk has come to refer to the means by which people measure and manage the uncertainties of the future (Reith 2008: 55). As a notion that is 'tied to the possibility that the future can be altered, or at least perceived as such, by human activities' (Zinn 2008: 4), the utility of this concept lies not in its ability to correctly predict future outcomes; rather, its utility rests in its ability to provide a basis for decision-making (Reith 2008: 62) – by, for example, weighing up the probabilities and likelihoods, and evaluating different courses of action in order to minimize loss and maximize gain (Reith 2008: 63).

According to Douglas and Wildavsky (1983: 68), the way in which risks are measured depends on estimating the costs people pay versus the benefits they receive for various activities. Such 'costs' could of course be anything, but are often calculated in terms of money, death, ill health or the environment. In my research, I show how the costs related to education invariably revolve around economic outlays in relation to current and future livelihoods, and impact directly upon local people's decision to invest in education in the first place. Such costs, and the associated risks, can be justified if the desired return that corresponds with the transformative potential of schooling (in the form of a viable future livelihood) is forthcoming. But there is no guarantee of this.

Risk, then, is inextricably related to the concept of 'uncertainty'. It addresses situations when people are aware of, or perceive, a possibility of threat to something that is of value to them, and where the outcome is uncertain (Boholm 2003: 166).[20] For local *adivasi* youth, this 'something of value' relates, fundamentally, to their livelihoods, or the uncertainty that an investment in education, with its accompanying costs – money, time, knowledge, skill and status – will actually lead to a viable future livelihood. It is fundamental to risk because it concerns the future. More specifically, it concerns what is valued in the future (cf. Boholm 2003: 167).

As Douglas and Wildavsky (1983) have observed, people approach this kind of uncertainty and judge such risks in terms of locally relevant values and concerns, which are themselves embedded within the historical or social contexts (cf. Boholm 2003: 161). In Chapter 2, we will see how, for both Hindus and Christians, what is most valued – or what is of greatest concern – is a secure future livelihood. But shared values do more than inform the calculation of risks; they work on the probabilities of success, as well as on the perceived possibilities of failure and loss (Douglas and Wildavsky 1983: 85). Christians tend to estimate the probability of education-related livelihood success and economic gain to be higher than Hindus, who are more likely to view education in relation to the probability of economic losses. Such perceptions of the livelihood-related risks directly impact upon young people's (and their parents') willingness to invest in education.

In addition to future economic returns and livelihood possibilities, what young people seem to value most – or what they perceive to be most at risk – is the familiarity and security of village life: what Stambach (1998: 15) refers to as the 'deep social connections people have to one another as kin and kindred'. As discussed above, education poses a threat to this security because the discourse around it is intrinsically mobility oriented (Corbett 2007a). As I show in Chapter 3, the perception of such threats varies between generations, genders and religious communities: education-related mobility out of the village has both positive and negative economic implications for those who leave – and for those who remain in the village (cf. Mosse et al. 2007). Whether the expected returns come to pass or not, in creating the possibility of movement out of the village, education by and large poses a risk to kin and community, loosening familiar ties and social connections, and leading to processes of 'geographic disembedding' outlined by Giddens (1990; Stambach 1998: 15).

Similar to Corbett's (2007a) observations about educational mobility in coastal Canada, what is fundamentally risky is the idea that formal education could deliver anything worthwhile to people whose social networks and economic and cultural capital remain largely localized: the knowledge

and skills that have been acquired over years; the livelihoods and labour practices on which members of the community have been able to depend; the status and social relationships that have been built up over years. A livelihood beyond agriculture is not devalued, per se; and indeed, the associated risks – not just financial or economic, but also social and temporal – can be justified if the anticipated return that corresponds with the transformative potential of schooling (in the form of viable employment) is forthcoming. However, as I shall explore further in Chapter 4, it is the uncertainty that education will actually yield this kind of return, particularly for marginalized rural *adivasis*, compounded by the probability that local forms of capital and sociality will be undermined or detrimentally transformed, that makes young people's extended engagement with education a potentially risky undertaking.

Research Context

This book represents a long overdue contribution to discussions about the value and utility of education, and the aspirations that underpin people's willingness to invest in it or not, privileging the perspectives of those who have benefited the least from India's extraordinary economic growth. Located at the intersection between the anthropology of education, youth and development studies, this examination takes place with reference to ethnographic research I have conducted in Mohanpur since 1997 (see Froerer 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2010). This book draws on this previous work and, to a greater extent, on twelve months of fieldwork that took place in the same village between 2002 and 2003, and on shorter fieldtrips in 2005 and 2008, between 2015 and 2019, and most recently in 2020.

On each return visit to Mohanpur, I am always welcomed back to the same home, which I share with Pacho, an elderly Oraon Christian woman whose son, Bahadur, serves as my local host. My return is invariably greeted with great excitement, and I spend days catching up on local news and gossip over countless cups of tea with my adopted village family and friends. Such visits are over too quickly and my departures are inevitably tearful – reflecting my status, acquired over the course of two decades, of 'daughter of the village' (*gaon ki beti*).

It was not always like this, of course. My initial arrival in Mohanpur in September 1997 was greeted with a kind of wary curiosity: what was a woman from the UK doing in a rural Chhattisgarhi village, hours away from the nearest town? I was in fact there to examine the nature of ethno-religious conflict between Christian and Hindu *adivasi* communities (see Froerer 2005, 2007). The 1990s was a period that saw the growth of

Hindu nationalism across India, leaving conflict and violence between right-wing Hindu nationalists and minority communities (mostly Muslims and Christians) in its wake (see Bhatt 2001; Hansen 1999; Jaffrelot 1996). I wanted to understand the spread and impact of this movement within economically marginalized rural communities, and particularly the instrumental role played by external organizations like the Catholic Church and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist organization involved in education and social outreach, in fomenting communal divisions amongst *adivasis*. I had chosen this part of Chhattisgarh because of its demographic composition: Mohanpur was around three-quarters Hindu and one-quarter Christian *adivasi*, which meant it was an ideal location to examine ethno-religious conflict against the backdrop of an expanding Hindu nationalist movement (Froerer 2007).

When I first arrived in Mohanpur, both Hindus and Christians alike assumed that I was linked to the Catholic Church, involved in some sort of missionary activity. The fact that my original connection to the village happened to be through the Church (in the form of a Catholic priest, an old acquaintance of my former doctoral supervisor who had worked in the area in the 1970s) only served to reinforce this assumption (see Froerer 2007). Whereas local Christians were delighted to play host to such an important guest, one who hailed from the same part of the world as their leader (the Pope), local Hindus remained suspicious of my allegiances and intentions: not wishing to become Christian, they were advised by the village headman, a Ratiya Kanwar Hindu, to steer clear of me.

My living arrangements didn't help matters. Prior to my arrival, it had been decided that I should live in the Oraon '*basti*' (neighbourhood) and stay in the home of Bahadur, a respected member of the Oraon Christian community who happened to have extra space in his mud house to accommodate me and Sumitra, a local Oraon woman who had been appointed as my field assistant. Having played no part in these arrangements, I was touched by the consideration given to my practical needs, which enabled me to settle in relatively quickly and get down to the business of fieldwork. After only a week or so, however, I realized that if I wanted to build relations with local Hindus I had to mitigate my association with my Christian hosts. Over the next few months, I therefore made it a point to spend the majority of each day in the company of local Hindus who lived in the main village *basti*, making a special effort to endear myself to the headman. Their suspicions gradually lessened: they became used to my presence and my awkward (and often irritating) questions, and they eventually became convinced that my intentions were indeed academic, not evangelical. But it was only after I returned to Mohanpur in late 2002, some three years after the conclusion of that first period of fieldwork, that my status as

'daughter of the village' was firmly established. '*Hamare beti vapas agayi*' was the greeting I received from both Hindus and Christians: our daughter has come home.

As with other villages in the area, the majority (around 95%) of Mohanpur's inhabitants are *adivasi*, with a small number of 'Other Backward Caste' (OBC) and 'Scheduled Caste' (SC) households.[21] In 1997, Mohanpur's population was just below 900; for the past decade or so, it has hovered around 1100, split between seven Hindu *jatis* (castes or social groups), who continue to make up around three-quarters of the population, and one Christian *jati*, the Oraon *adivasis* (Scheduled Tribe, or ST), who make up the other quarter of the 180 or so local households. The Ratiya Kanwar Hindus, an *adivasi* (ST) group that has lived in the area 'since the beginning', make up nearly half the village population and remain the most politically dominant group in the area. The headman has traditionally come from this caste, which also has superior rights to the land in comparison with other Hindu *adivasi* groups who live locally. The latter consists of Majhuar and Dudh Kanwar (both *adivasi* with ST status), along with Yadav (OBC), and Panika, Chauhan and Lohar (all Scheduled Caste). With the exception of the Ratiya Kanwar, who are regarded as the 'sons of the soil' and therefore have superior rights to the land owing to their 'original settler' (*khuntkattidar*) status, all other Hindu groups migrated to the area between three and five generations ago 'in search of land'. The Oraon *adivasis*, who are descendants of converts who joined the Catholic church during one of the mass conversion movements that took place in Chhattisgarh in the 1930s, immigrated to the area in the early 1970s from a neighbouring district, also in search of cultivable land. Considered to be untouchable (*achut*) by local Hindus (SC and ST alike), the Oraons were forced to live half a kilometre away from the main village. Since that time, interactions between them and the local Hindu castes have continued to revolve around rules of untouchability, mostly concerning the consumption of food and access to communal water sources. With a population of around 280, the Oraons are presently the second-largest community in the village.[22]

Like many *adivasi* communities in this part of India, the village is surrounded by thick jungle, from which local people have carved their livelihoods. When the Oraons arrived in the area, all titled landholdings were in the hands of the local Hindu community, with the majority of land concentrated in the hands of the Ratiya Kanwars. Consequently, most Oraon Christians were forced to cultivate on encroached forestland, and it was several years before they began to reap any sort of harvest from their efforts. It was at this time – the mid-1970s – that the coal, aluminium,

and electricity plants that today comprise the main economy of Korba, the nearest city located some forty kilometres from Mohanpur, were being constructed or expanded, and Oraon men were able to obtain work as casual labourers on these sites, returning to the village every two to four weeks or so with bags of rice for their families. It was also at this time that the Oraons' local reputation for 'hard work' and for earning their livelihoods from 'outside' the village was firmly established locally. Nowadays, all villagers earn their livelihoods through a combination of rice cultivation and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products, although the Oraons' engagement in outside wage labour continues to surpass that of Hindus. Over the past few years, a handful of enterprising individuals – Hindus and Christians alike – have attempted to supplement their local livelihoods with other income-generating schemes, such as the sale of poultry, vegetable and small-goods vending, or tailoring. However, the majority continue to rely on agriculture.[23]

In contrast to their impoverished beginnings, today the Oraon Christian community enjoys a relative material wealth that surpasses that of the Hindus. This is largely related to their continued engagement in wage-based labour outside the village, along with the occasional remittances that some households receive from their children who work as cooks, drivers, or housekeepers in the city. There are, of course, varying degrees of prosperity between individual Christian households, but none is as destitute as some of the poorer Hindu households. Notwithstanding this general economic differentiation, the village as a whole consists of individuals who are extremely marginalized in social and economic terms, with the majority of local households living 'below the poverty line'.

When I first began research in 1997, most villagers had never made the five-hour journey to Korba. Since that time, this journey has shortened to two hours, thanks to the paved road that was constructed between Korba and Mohanpur in 2005, and nowadays most local people have travelled to the city at least once or twice, with some (shopkeepers, teachers, the village headman) making regular, sometimes daily visits to 'carry out business'. Around eighteen households (roughly 10%) sport a satellite dish, and nearly every household has a mobile phone – a dramatic increase over the past five years, although usage is still relatively limited, owing to the unreliable mobile coverage. Ownership of such 'luxury' possessions represents prestige over practical purposes, because of the lack of regular electricity supply. The past couple of years has seen the construction of outdoor latrines for most households, although few make regular use of them, preferring instead the comparative cleanliness of the forest. An increasing number of households have motorcycles and there are three tractors

in the village. In the past couple of years, a handful of households have acquired solar panels, enabling a 'dual season' harvest – that is, a winter and summer harvest – and potential sale of surplus agricultural yield. In spite of this comparative increase in material wealth, which has been enabled, in part, by government schemes like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA),[24] the relative geographical and cultural distance from the urban Indian 'mainstream' contributes to the general 'backwardness' with which this area continues to be associated.[25]

Schooling in Mohanpur

As in many villages in *adivasi* regions across India, formal education was introduced in the village in the mid-1970s with the construction of the local primary school. Prior to this, local people had little access to formal education, a fact that is demonstrated by the high illiteracy rates amongst the adult population. Since its construction, the school has catered to children from mostly Hindu households. When I first arrived in the village in 1997, very few Hindu children were allowed to carry on much beyond Class 2 or 3, and in 1999 only five children (out of a class of 25 who started Class 1 in 1994) completed Class 5, with only two carrying on to secondary school that year. In 2018, 12 children out of a class of 25 completed class 5 and all carried on into secondary school. Today, the three-room school has two teachers and enrolment hovers between 65 and 90 children every year, though the teachers estimate that only 35-40 attend on a regular basis. The majority of these regular attendees (one-third of whom are girls) will complete Class 5 and carry on into secondary school – although few of these will study beyond Class 9-10.

While most Hindu children attend the local primary school, the Oraon Christians typically board at the Catholic church compound in Madanpur, a larger village six kilometres away, which is also home to the government primary and secondary schools that boarders and other villagers attend. The construction of this compound coincided with the arrival of Mohanpur's first primary school in the mid-1970s. A health clinic and school boarding hostel were built on the Church compound in the early 1980s to cater for the spiritual and secular needs of the growing Oraon Christian population in the area. Owing to their initial reservations about the utility of education, the majority of local Christians only began to send their children to board at the hostel from the late 1980s onward. The Church hostel is open to non-Christian students, but anti-Christian sentiment stirred up by Hindu nationalist groups like the RSS over the

past couple of decades, combined with what are considered excessively high fees, has deterred local Hindus from sending their children to the hostel; I discuss these issues further in Chapter 1 (cf. Froerer 2007).

In total, I have spent nearly five years across two decades carrying out ethnographic research in Mohanpur and the surrounding area. My preferred research approach throughout all of this time reflects that well-known anthropological pastime of 'deep hanging out' (Geertz 1998), which is underpinned by a combination of participant observation of daily life in the village, and informal conversations and formal interviews with children and youth, their parents, teachers and other local and district authorities. Conversations were usually spontaneous, informal and open-ended, while interviews were invariably more structured, with focus directed, in my most recent field trips, toward issues related to education: what people thought of its purpose, and how they valued it; whether it was enjoyable or not, and why; how it compared to other forms of knowledge; what they thought they might gain from it, and how it featured in their future aspirations. Some of these interviews were recorded; most of them, along with other ethnographic information and data (household and demographic surveys, school records, health records, land titles, etc.), were written up by hand in fieldwork diaries. While Mohanpur has served as my research 'base', I regularly travelled to neighbouring villages or towns to visit extended family or friends of my village hosts, or to attend weddings or funerals, or village fetes or festivals. I also spent regular time in both the village school and the Catholic boarding hostel in Madanpur, and visited other government and private schools and colleges in neighbouring villages and in Korba.

Throughout this period, I have also witnessed a whole generation of young people replaced with another. Small children who were terrified of me when I first arrived in the village in 1997 became friends and invaluable interlocutors, grew up and married, and now have small children of their own. Young mothers have become grandmothers, and young men have attained the status of household patriarch, following in the footsteps of their fathers, who have become respected village elders, or have passed away. While most of these now-adults completed primary school, only a few went on to secondary school, and fewer still carried on beyond Class 10. Throughout all of this, the value attributed to education has shifted, as have young people's aspirations, their ideas about the role that schooling might play in their future, and their understanding about the particular structural conditions and constraints that might enable or impede them from acting upon these. As their perspectives, understandings and aspirations have shifted, so too has my subject position. When I first arrived in

the village I was very concerned about the lack of educational engagement and found myself actively encouraging villagers to send their children to school. Months of immersive ethnographic observation brought with it a deeper understanding of local people's perspectives about the questionable utility of education, and particularly their refusal to buy into narratives about its transformative potential. Over the past two decades I also came to appreciate the complex ways in which their views altered and were readjusted in relation to different opportunities or constraints.

It is an attempt to understand these processes that the remainder of this book is devoted to. In what follows, consideration is given to the comparative educational advantages – in terms of access, attainment and acquisition of education-related employment – that local Christians have over Hindus, along with the historical reasons for such advantages, and the way in which these continue to impact upon young people's aspirations and ability to translate their educational capital into different forms of social mobility. Above all, I am interested in the localized meanings and understandings that rural *adivasis* bring to bear on the value of education, and how – and why – their perspective differs from dominant discourses and assumptions surrounding its transformative potential.

Structure of the Book

This introduction has highlighted some of the overarching themes that frame the central analytical query of this book: namely, how the relationship between education, aspiration and social mobility shapes the livelihood possibilities and futures of marginalized rural young people. While the ethnography that informs this book is drawn from a particular cultural and historical context (namely, the roughly two decades between 2002 and 2020), I hope to demonstrate how it is possible to extrapolate my analysis to other parts of rural India where – as in many *adivasi*-dominated areas – livelihoods are linked to both land and forest, where the population has comparatively recently begun to engage systematically with formal school education, and where historically-grounded inequalities continue to persist alongside new ones.

Chapter 1 examines the broader social, economic and historical context that has shaped the way in which marginalized *adivasi* people understand and engage with education. More specifically, it traces how the 'social good' discourses underpinning the benefits of education resonate with both the 'civilizing processes' that characterized the colonial era and continue to underpin India's national education policies today.

My objective in this chapter is to lay the groundwork from which to unpack a seemingly contradictory idea, whereby marginalized *adivasi* people in rural India both agree that education is immensely transformative whilst remaining dubious about its actual utility and relevance to their own lives.

Chapter 2 considers the value and utility of education, as perceived and measured by local people themselves, and examines how this value impacts upon young people's educational engagement and aspirations for a better future. Through consideration of a series of ethnographic portraits, I show how the value ascribed to education is at once embedded within localized forms of cultural capital and governed by broader 'doxic' discourses that are associated with its 'intrinsic benefits'. I also demonstrate how this value is contingent not on the transformative power or 'economic potential' of education alone, but on its capacity to position the individual into a more desirable social or material place.

Chapter 3 explores how local people's differentiated aspirations for mobility are shaped in relation to the complex social, economic and historical factors in which local livelihood and mobility decisions are embedded. Particular attention will be given to three such factors: the history and relationship that local people have with land, labour and livelihood practices, along with the viability of different fallback options; the important role played by social capital in facilitating access to different livelihood possibilities; and the prospective separation from kin and community.

Chapter 4 focuses on the (perceived) risks and uncertainties that govern young people's willingness to invest in secondary schooling and impact upon their aspirations for a livelihood outside the rural village. Importance will be given to the way in which education-related risks are contextualized locally and to how these go on to inform young people's pursuit of mobility out of the village. The significance of kinship and community support, along with the role played by different forms of social capital in tempering the risk and facilitating educational access to (especially) non-rural livelihood opportunities, will also be discussed.

Returning to the central theme of the book, the conclusion suggests that it is only by paying attention to the ways in which education, aspiration and social mobility are inextricably connected that a more comprehensive understanding of the wider structures of inequality that mediate marginalized youths' aspirations, their engagement with education, and their translation of educational capital into viable forms of social mobility can be gained. Acknowledging again the importance of comparative ethnographic analysis, I also emphasize that it is not only necessary to examine how young people's engagement with education and their aspirations for social mobility are mediated by particular historical, social and

economic experiences of relative exclusion and marginality, and by wider structural conditions and constraints, but also to accept that young people possess a degree of autonomy in relation to how they construct, negotiate, and act upon their choices.

Notes

1. I use pseudonyms for all friends and participants to protect their identities. I have also changed the name of the village (Mohanpur) and surrounding villages.
2. 'Scheduled Tribe' (ST) is a legal-administrative category and official designation given by the Indian government for historically marginalized or disadvantaged groups: namely, *adivasi* or 'original inhabitant' (see Galanter 1984; Unnithan 1994: 113), which invokes a cultural and political identity rooted in indigeneity and shared histories of marginalization. Today, those classified as ST (along with SC, or Scheduled Caste) are eligible for special government benefits, a type of 'affirmative action' that includes reservations in employment and elite educational institutions, scholarships, and so on (Singh 1972; Desai 1975; Kulkani 1991). These are in no way essentializing categories, but remain fluid, shifting and contested in relation to different colonial and post-colonial histories, community perspectives and practices. I have unpacked these at greater depth in previous work (see Froerer 2007). For more critical discussion of these categories, whose meaning and usage both within official government discourse and by activists and academics alike remains contentious, see Mathur 1972, Hardiman 1987, Baviskar 1995, Pathy et al. 1976, and Xaxa 1999. For the way in which the concept 'indigeneity' – alongside the category 'Indigenous peoples' – has come to feature in this discourse, see Nixon 2025.
3. It is partly because of the problematic nature of the notion 'tribe' that the term '*adivasi*' ('original inhabitant') has become increasingly preferable for researchers and activists – not only because it is employed in administrative and political contexts, but because it is used by *adivasi*s themselves to differentiate their communities and cultural practices from non-*adivasi*s, and to claim political material resources from the state (see Baviskar 2005; Sundar 2006; Skaria 1999; Hardiman 1987; Prasad 2003; Xaxa 1999; Nixon 2025). These communities have been the subject of much earlier anthropological work. See for example Forsyth (1889), Russell and Hiralal (1923), Ghurye (1959), Grigson (1949), Dube (1951) and Fuchs (1973). Additional information on tribals in Chhattisgarh can be found in very generalized collections on tribal people in India (von Fürer-Haimendorf 1982; Mamoria 1952; Majumdar 1958; Ghurye 1959; Roy 1972). More contemporary work focuses largely on the Gonds, the largest tribal group in India whose population spreads across various districts in Chhattisgarh (Mehta 1984; Gell 1992; Gell 1986, 1997; Chaudhuri 2001). See also Moodie's (2015) recent work, which critically examines the concept of *adivasi* in relation to Scheduled Tribe, highlighting the complicating factors and tensions between these statuses and identities in relation to a third category, 'indigeneity'. In this incisive account, Moodie explores how these categories intersect, diverge, and are mobilized –

particularly by *adivasi* women in their pursuit of recognition, rights, and aspirations. For the way in which the concept 'indigeneity' and related category 'Indigenous peoples' have come to feature in this broader discussion, see also Shah (2010), Guenther and Kenrick et al. (2006) and Beteille (1998). For a recent discussion of the enduring complexities of these categories in their meaning and usage, see Nixon (2025).

4. While the global poverty line currently stands at $2.15 (World Bank Open Data Report 2023), at the time of fieldwork, the international poverty line was set at $1.25 per person per day. In India, this translated into Rs/ 14.3 per person per day in rural areas (cf. India's 2005 National Sample Survey and World Bank Report 2005).
5. I recognize that 'education' is a process of knowledge transmission that takes place in varyingly formal and informal contexts and through varyingly formal and informal methods – all of which have different implications in relation to aspiration and social mobility amongst marginalized communities. While a consideration of these wider issues is necessary for a fuller understanding of the relationship between education, aspiration and social mobility amongst marginalized communities, for the purposes of this monograph I restrict my discussion to formal (school) education.
6. For a discussion of different outcomes that are commonly correlated with a lack of education, see Balagopalan 2003; Rose and Dyer (2008: 12–13); Sarvalingam and Sivakumar (2004); Jeffrey et al. (2008); Jakimow (2016).
7. For more ethnographically-grounded work that places gender at the centre of analysis, see Jeffery and Jeffery (1994); Jeffery and Basu (1996); Chaudhuri and Roy (2009); Del Franco (2010); Rao (2010b); Bhatti and Jeffery (2012); Morrow (2013); Froerer (2015); Rao (2018); Mathew and Lukose (2020).
8. Bourdieu often likens the *field* to a game, in terms of the rules that must be followed, the stakes at play, the competition between 'players' and the returns that are yielded. See Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992: 98–100).
9. Willis also acknowledged the importance of gender within this cultural milieu, although his account is very male ('lads')-focused, with little attention to how gender affects working-class students. For a more critical account of how gender (and race) are integral to processes of social and class reproduction, see Bettie's (2014) excellent ethnographic examination of how Latina and white working-class girls are marginalized within educational settings. For further comparison, see Holland and Eisenhart (1990), whose work demonstrates how gender-based inequalities are reproduced within US colleges, impacting on women's professional aspirations and reinforcing traditional gender roles.
10. For extended discussion on these and related topics, see Sancho 2013; Andres et al. 2007; Marjoribanks 2005; Rao 2010; Odell 1989; Alexander and Campbell 1964; Dressel and Startup 1994; Gutman and Akerman 2008; Tafare 2010; cf. MacBrayne 1987; Haller and Virkler 1993; Akande 1987; Stewart et al. 2007. See also the recent collection of papers edited by Mathew and Lukose (2020), which explores the interplay between education, aspiration and inequality against the backdrop of India's neoliberal reforms, focusing on the production of new forms of social mobility and exclusion. In addition to this literature, there is a diverse range of academic work that engages more implicitly with ideas related to aspira-

tion. See for example Calestani (2013), whose work examines the role of aspiration and wellbeing in Bolivia; Ferguson (1999), whose classic ethnography on the Zambian copperbelt engages with the issue of failed aspirations in the context of urbanization and development; Li (2007), who examines hopes and aspirations for livelihood improvement in Indonesia in the context of development in action; cf. also Tafere 2010 and 2014; Crivello 2015.

11. For a critical, anthropologically-grounded overview of neoliberalism, see Ganti (2014) and Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008).
12. Zipin et al. (2015: 242) also identify a third, less tangible 'logic' which they term 'emergent aspirations' or 'future-tending impulses' and which hold the possibility of pursuing alternative futures.
13. This is similar in some ways to Appadurai's (2004) navigational capacity, denoting the way in which (especially privileged) groups are more easily able to use their social and cultural capital to realize their aspirations or navigate the future of social opportunities; cf. Vigh 2009.
14. One exception is anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn, who led a group of scholars in a comparative study of values (1951a, 1951b, 1956; cf. Graeber 2001: 2), defining it as a conception of the 'good' or 'desirable' that somehow influences the choices people make (Kluckhohn 1951: 395; cf. Graeber 2001: 1–3). More recently, Louis Dumont's work (1980, 1983, 1986, 2013) on the history and ideas about value has led some to classify him 'in a league of his own as a value theorist' (Gregory 2013: 116). His seminal contribution to this discussion was to highlight how values – including what he terms everyday 'micro-values' – are fundamentally relational and hierarchical, shaped by and embedded within broader ideological structures that organize societies. This foundational approach has been criticized for the way in which it represents value relations as being static, leaving little room for individual agency (see Graeber 2001; Bourdieu 1990).
15. Sociologist Georg Simmel (1904: 83–84) made a similar point decades earlier, when he noted that every value has to be acquired through the sacrifice of some other value (Simmel 1904: 84). Here, Simmel was talking about economic exchange, and how the acquisition of a particular useful good or value necessitates the sacrifice of another value. His ideas have gone on to inspire numerous social theorists (cf. for example Appadurai 1986).
16. Debates surrounding the notion of value are obviously more complex than this. Within anthropology, Graeber's (2001) seminal work, inspired by Marx as well as Simmel (1904), Klukhohn (1951a, 1951b, 1956), Dumont (1980, 1986, 2013), Turner (2003, 2008) and others, serves as an attempt to synthesize economic, political and cultural theories of value (cf. Robbins 2004). Beckert and Aspers (2011) bring a sociological approach to the way in which values are formed in different social and cultural contexts. For more extended discussion of these issues, see the two-part special issue edited by Ton Otto and Rane Willerslev (Otto and Willerslev 2013a, 2013b).
17. This resonates with Dumont's (2013; cf. 1980, 1986) discussion of how everyday (micro) values are embedded within overarching ideological structures. Another way of framing this is in relation to Appadurai's (1986) 'regimes of value', where the value attributed to a particular good or service varies between different regimes or contexts.

18. See Bourdieu (1984, 1986, 1990a), who discusses how cultural commodities (including education) can be exchanged for other kinds of capital throughout much of his work.
19. Beckert (2011) takes inspiration from Durkheim's classic *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, arguing that valuation is in many ways connected to (or positioned within) the social and moral order of society (2011: 107). In this regard, he actually proposed three types of performance that may determine the value of a good: its physical value, its positional value, and its imaginative value – each of which could be simultaneously present in any good (although I limit my analysis to 'positional value').
20. Here, it is important to acknowledge that while I use these concepts interchangeably throughout this monograph, there are some overlooked but important distinctions between 'risk' and 'uncertainty'. Risk, for example, refers to random outcomes with 'knowable probabilities'; uncertainty refers to outcomes that cannot be quantified for lack of knowledge (see Gudeman 2008: 22–23). Such distinctions were famously outlined by the economist, Frank Knight, who stated very categorically that whereas risk is measurable, uncertainty is not (Knight 2015[1921]: 233). While it is important to keep these distinctions in mind, for the present purposes – and for the simple reason that an investment in education is underpinned by both knowable risks and unknowable uncertainties – I conflate the meaning of these concepts throughout this monograph.
21. OBC, or 'Other Backward Caste', is the designation given by the government of India to classify castes that are socially and politically disadvantaged or 'backward'. Within the Hindu caste system, OBCs are categorized below the 'General' or 'Forward' caste groups, but above SC (Scheduled Castes) which, like ST (Scheduled Tribe), denotes those groups that are traditionally considered to be the most socially and economically marginalized. Those groups that belong to the caste categories that fall below 'General' or 'Forward' caste, which were denoted in the 1950s, are entitled to different forms of 'reservations' with respect to higher education and public sector employment.
22. Notwithstanding the dominance of the Ratiya Kanwar caste, throughout this book I tend to use the term 'Hindu' when discussing the local Hindu community as a whole. While the Ratiya Kanwar and other local groups have traditionally referred to themselves by their specific caste name, my usage of this term reflects the fact that 'Hindu' is routinely employed by both Ratiya Kanwars and other *adivasis* and non-*adivasi* Hindus to juxtapose themselves to local Christians. I also tend to use the terms 'Oraon' and 'Christian' interchangeably, as both of these terms represent the same community.
23. This is in keeping with the fact that 80% of Chhattisgarh's population lives in rural areas and depends on agriculture and allied activities (the collection and sale of forest produce) for their livelihoods (cf. http://www.chhattisgarhonline.in/About/Profile/Economy/index.html; see also Chhattisgarh Human Development Report 2005).
24. Launched nationally in 2005 and in Chhattisgarh in 2006, the NREGA (renamed MGNREGA, or Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, in 2009) scheme guarantees 100 days of employment at Rs. 120 per day to adult members of poor, rural households. In 2018, the average payment per day had

risen to Rs 260. See Ambasta, Shankar and Shah (2008) and Gaiha et al. (2010) for a critical examination of this scheme.

25. Popular stereotypes that contribute to this 'backward' label and persist within mainstream Indian society include living within forested environments, speaking a tribal dialect, holding animistic beliefs, hunting and gathering, and drinking and dancing (see Pathy et al. 1976).