

Timepass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting in India¹

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I Introduction

In 2004 I spent time with a student named Jaipal in Meerut College, Uttar Pradesh (UP). Jaipal was in his late twenties at that time and came from a lower middle class, rural background. He had failed to obtain a salaried job; Jaipal described himself as “unemployed”, someone “just waiting”. Politics was Jaipal’s *métier*. He was often at the forefront of collective student demonstrations against the Meerut College bureaucracy. A typical morning might find him leading protests against the corruption of university officials or lambasting a government official for neglecting student issues. Curiously, however, Jaipal often spent his evenings at the homes of university administrators and government bureaucrats colluding over how to make money from illegal admissions. It was an open secret in Meerut that many student leaders (*netās*) protested alongside other students against corruption while also making money from their political influence.

Why did Jaipal imagine himself as someone “just waiting? What types of politics might emerge from such a sense of limbo? And how might answers to these questions inform our understanding of democracy in India? This paper addresses these questions with reference to field research conducted in 2004-2005 in Meerut City, north India. In the next section I summarize recent research on unemployed young men and discuss how the politics of unemployed youth might be conceptualized. The subsequent three sections form the empirical “core” of the paper: I analyze how young men

¹ This paper draws on my new book, *Timepass: Youth, Class and the Politics of Waiting in India* (Jeffrey 2010a).

studying in western UP have responded to blocked mobility at the levels of cultural practice (section III), collective youth protest (section IV), and more self-interested forms of class-based politicking (section V). The conclusions draw out the wider significance of my analysis for our understanding of cultural and political expressions of Indian democracy.

II Theorizing the politics of unemployed young men

The combination of a rapid increase in people's investment in education and a shortage of salaried employment for high school and university matriculates has created a vast problem of educated unemployment among young people in south Asia, as in other parts of the world. This problem became much more visible and intense in the 1990s and early 2000s in India, as a result of demographic growth, rapidly rising educational enrolment, and the failure of the Indian economy to create large numbers of secure jobs (Ul-Haq 2003; Jeffrey et al. 2008).

Educated unemployment affects young women as well as men in India. But evidence from areas as diverse as Punjab (Chowdhry 2009), Tamil Nadu (Anandhi et al. 2002), and Madhya Pradesh (Heuzé 1996) suggests that young men experience their joblessness most acutely. This reflects strongly gendered schooling and employment strategies wherein parents tend to privilege boys' schooling over that of girls (Chopra and Jeffery, 2005) and prioritize finding paid work for their sons (Jeffrey et al. 2008).

Scholars employing ethnographic methods have started to uncover the anxieties of educated unemployed youth in the 1990s and 2000s within and outside India. Educated unemployed young men are often unable to marry (see Masquelier 2005; Chowdhry 2009). They frequently find it difficult to leave home and purchase or rent independent living space (Hansen 2005). Educated unemployed young men are also commonly dogged by a sense of not having achieved locally salient norms of masculine success (Osella and Osella 2000; Cole 2004). Public discourses of educated unemployed

young men as “louts” (McDowell 2003) or hyper-masculine and violent “threats” to the state and civil society exacerbate this gendered crisis (Stambach 1998; Roitman 2004).

The theme of “waiting” emerges strongly in recent research on unemployed young men in India. The author Pankaj Mishra (2006) has written evocatively of towns in north India where young men appear to be “just waiting for something to happen”, and his novel on youth politics in Benares is saturated with images of young men in limbo (Mishra 2004; see also Myrdal 1967 on waiting in India). Similarly, in his work in provincial central India, Gerard Heuzé’s describes a population of lower middle class young men who spent most of their time simply “hanging around” at major road intersections. The cultural and political importance of unemployed young men preoccupied by boredom and a sense of being left behind is also well attested in Indian cinema. Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) has traced a move in Bollywood films from depictions of “angry young men” in the 1970s, typified by Amitabh Bachchan, to representations of unemployed young men as disorientated loafers (*tapori*) in the 1990s (see especially the movie *Rangeela* (2004).

Recent ethnographic research paints a complex picture of the practices of unemployed young men in India. Some research points to the reactionary, self-serving nature of youth action. For example, Hansen (1996) describes how widespread exclusion from secure employment led lower middle class young men in Bombay in the 1990s to craft identities as Hindu nationalist political bosses and act as provocateurs during anti-Muslim agitations (see also Heuzé 1992). Prem Chowdhry (2009) has studied unemployed young men in Haryana who engage in violent political practices within all-male caste *panchayats*. Other scholars highlight the democratic activity of lower middle young men in India. Where educated unemployed young men come from formerly subordinated communities they may act as political entrepreneurs, assisting their communities in matters of everyday social and political endeavor. Moreover, Krishna (2002) argues that educated unemployed young men from lower middle class backgrounds in rural western India in the 1990s often used their schooling to help

impoverished villagers in their negotiations with the state, circulate political discourses, and intercede in local disputes (see also Kamat 2002). In a similar vein, Gooptu (2007) has described relatively wealthy young men from families historically associated with organized labor in West Bengal who engaged in “social service” (*samāj sevā*). What unites the studies of Hansen, Chowdhry, Krishna and Gooptu is their emphasis on the mundane: unemployed young men often advance their goals—be they reactionary or progressive—along relatively hidden pathways, in everyday spaces of social life, and through cultivating relationships with diverse representatives of the state.

The varied, informal nature of the political practices of unemployed young men points to a need for a flexible, fine-grained approach to theorizing politics, one that examines micro-tactics and everyday endeavor as well as institutions, electoral politics, and major epochal events. In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, there was a rich vein of political anthropological work that addressed questions of quotidian political action in India (Bailey’s 1957; 1963; Brass 1965; Carter 1974). But, with notable exceptions (e.g. Wade 1985; 1988; Robinson 1988), political science research on South Asia in the 1980s and 1990s shifted towards analysis of elections and the construction of large-scale models of political behavior.

Recent anthropological research on the relationship between state and society suggests a renaissance of interest in ethnographic approaches to politics and offers a useful starting point for thinking about the political strategies of educated unemployed young men (e.g. Gupta 1995; Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson 2006; Sivaramakrishnan and Gupta 2010). Drawing on Foucault, scholarship on the anthropology of the state has exposed the subtle discursive and material apparatus through which the state and other powerful institutions constitute people as subjects of rule (e.g. Fuller and Bénéï 2001; Hansen and Stepputat 2001). This emphasis on governmentality, understood as the micro-political processes through which state power conditions people to act in specific ways, demonstrates how visions of moral and social behavior disseminated by dominant institutions come to shape the

practices of people on the ground. Scholars have begun to rework Foucault in order to show how subordinated social actors inhabit, manipulate, and contest broader governmentalizing logics (e.g. Appadurai 2002; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Chatterjee 2004; Sivaramakrishnan and Gupta 2010).

At the same time, however, studies of governmentality in the postcolonial world sometimes emerge from an engagement with Foucault presenting a somewhat unhelpful binary picture of political practice wherein the state and urban bourgeoisie is pitted against a local “political society” (Chatterjee 2004) or “public culture” (Gupta 1995). The search for some broad arena of radical non-state action – the politics of “the masses” – takes precedence over analysis of how ordinary society is divided, for example between relatively prosperous people and the very poor. One of the effects of this de-emphasis on class divisions at the local level is to distract attention from the often crucial role played by lower middle classes, including youth from this section of society, in political dynamics on the ground.

This argument can be drawn out through reference to the influential recent work of Partha Chatterjee. Chatterjee (1998: 59) makes a distinction between “civil society” and “political society” in India. In Chatterjee’s model, civil society refers to institutions originating in Western societies which are founded on legal norms and moral ideas of fair play. “Civil society in India today, peopled largely by the urban middle classes, is the sphere that seeks to be congruent with the normative models of bourgeois civil society” (Chatterjee 2008: 57). For Chatterjee, political society refers to a zone of political action in which the urban poor and the majority of those living in rural areas bargain with the state. “Those in political society make their claims on government, and in turn are governed, not within the framework of stable constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations” (*ibid.*) These “contextual and unstable arrangements”—often illegal and sometimes violent—typically involve the members of political society developing their own moral claims to resources based on particular

notions of community. The denizens of political society rarely make reference to bourgeois norms of liberal government: they hustle, negotiate and break the law, drawing on local idioms.

In his elaboration of how political society works in practice, Chatterjee (2004) frequently emphasizes broad-based political mobilizations in which “the masses” obtain resources from the state. Chatterjee therefore tends to see political society as a democratizing force. Moreover, Chatterjee foregrounds instances in which different lower middle classes, such as party workers or schoolteachers, have assisted the poor within political society.

Chatterjee’s emphasis on informal political practice occurring mainly outside of elections is useful for an understanding of the politics of unemployed young men in India. And his conceptualization of how lower middle classes, such as teachers and local-level party workers, may assist the poor in negotiations with the state is important. But in this paper I will suggest that Chatterjee overplays the distinction between civil and political society, ignoring how civil and legal practices often characterize the politics of ordinary people in India. Moreover, in emphasizing the democratic potential of political society, Chatterjee distracts from destructive forms of lower middle class politics.

The work of Pierre Bourdieu offers an alternative point of entry into the study of the politics of unemployed young men. Drawing on an analysis of French society, Bourdieu (1984; 1986) argued that people are differentiated according to their possession of economic capital, social capital—which he defines as useful social connections accruing to individuals or class fractions—and cultural capital: a range of goods, titles and forms of behavior that provide distinction in social situations. Bourdieu was especially interested in the practices through which class advantage is communicated and reinforced, and he stressed the manner in which power is contained within the “habitus”: internalized orientations to action inscribed in people’s demeanour, reflexes and tastes that both reflect people’s histories and shape their futures.

Bourdieu has stressed that the habitus must be understood in relation to the concept of “field”. He viewed society as comprised of distinct fields of social competition in which people with greater economic, social and cultural capital and with a habitus attuned to possibilities for gain tend to outwit poorer groups. Bourdieu often used the analogy of the game to express what he meant by field. Like the game, the field has stakes (*enjeux*). Similarly game-like is people’s tendency to invest in competing within different fields based on their shared appreciation of the value of the goods at stake: “Each field calls forth and gives life to a specific form of interest, a specific illusion, a tacit recognition of the value of the stakes of the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 117). Bourdieu stresses that the value of a particular form of social capital or cultural capital varies within different fields. “Just as the relative value of cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital (economic, social, and cultural) varies across the various fields” (*ibid.*).

Bourdieu’s theoretical schema is valuable in highlighting inequalities within a population of educated unemployed young men. Bourdieu’s practical application of the concepts of habitus and field pointed to the ability of those from advantaged backgrounds to negotiate distinctive markets for resources – social microcosms such as competition for access to the police or for places at a prestigious government college - with relative ease. Bourdieu also focuses on the type of confidence that comes with being able to succeed routinely within multiple spheres of social competition. But much of Bourdieu’s work rather suggests that poorer sections of society are incapable of engaging in critique or effecting meaningful agency (e.g. Cloke *et al.* 1995). It is therefore useful to set alongside Bourdieu’s framework the emphasis of other scholars on agency and resistance (e.g. Gramsci 1971; Chatterjee 2004), and the agency of young people especially (Willis 1982; Hall 1985; Butler 1997). Willis (1982) pays particular attention to how – in particular conjunctures - youth may challenge established social forces through forms of cultural production, and he emphasizes mischievous and creative practices.

I therefore offer a critically minded Bourdieuan approach to a study of everyday politics in India. This approach relies centrally on Bourdieu's insights with respect to how advantaged strata in society perpetuate privilege. At the same time, my Bourdieuan analysis is tempered by sensitivity to instances in which people do not straightforwardly pursue their class interests and to idiosyncratic, mischievous dimensions of the political. This is precisely what the example of Jaipal's double dealing at the beginning of this chapter appears to require: attention to middle class micro-strategies that serve narrow goals and to actions that are contrary to, or removed from, class "interests".

III Timepass in UP

UP is the most populous state in India with a population of 160 million in 2001. It is also one of the poorest states, and India's economic reforms since the early 1990s have increased inequalities between UP and more prosperous regions. Between 1947 and the mid-1980s, India's approach to macroeconomic planning combined a leading role for the private sector in economic decision-making with state intervention aimed at promoting growth through widespread development efforts (Chandrashekar and Ghosh 2002). In the face of a growing fiscal crisis, however, the Indian state began a program of economic liberalization in the mid-1980s which intensified in the early 1990s.

Young men coming of age in the early 2000s in UP faced a "perfect storm" of socio-economic trends the cumulative effect of which has been to create a generation of frustrated youth. Three processes merit particular attention. First, there was a bulge in the population of youth in UP in the 2000s; in 2001 there were nearly 50 percent more young men (21.9 million) in the age category 15-29 than there were in the age category 30-44 (14.7 million) (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India 2004; see also Lloyd 2005; Jeffrey et al. 2008; Joshi 2009).

Second, there was a decline in the standard of secondary and higher education in UP, partly as a consequence of liberalization. Until about 1990, the public sector was becoming more important within higher education. But the fiscal crisis of the UP Government in the 1990s, allied to neo-liberal economic reforms introduced in the early 1990s, eroded government higher educational provision. Government colleges and universities typically lacked teaching aids and equipment, catering facilities, and basic amenities. A vast gulf opened up in UP between a tiny upper stratum of higher educational institutions offering internationally acclaimed qualifications and the mass of poorly-funded government and private institutions catering to the majority of the population, including men like Jaipal belonging to the Jat caste.

Third—and no less crucially—economic reforms led to a diminution in opportunities for employment, at least until 2005. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the UP State government responded to a rising State fiscal deficit by reducing the number of new positions created within government bureaucracies. By the late 1990s, the number of government employees was actually declining within education (see Jeffery et al. 2005), and, in 2001, the World Bank made an annual two per cent cut in the size of UP's bureaucracy a condition of continuing aid to the state. Moreover, liberalization failed to generate private sector employment in UP, at least until the early 2000s. UP's industrial base declined rapidly, and most parts of UP did not witness a growth in the IT industry. And a reduction in government credit reduced opportunities for entrepreneurialism (Chandrashekar and Ghosh 2002).

In 2004 and 2005 I conducted research with young men who were studying in the UP city of Meerut, many of whom described themselves as “unemployed”, “underemployed” or “waiting for work”. I talked especially to students in Chaudhry Charan Singh University (CCSU) and Meerut College (MC). Most of my interviewees belonged to the Jat caste, which controls landownership and has better access to local state officials than do other caste groups. But I also interviewed substantial

numbers of Dalits and Muslims and a few upper castes, who were Brahmins or Rajputs. In addition to the roughly 100 young men whom I interviewed, I spoke to about fifteen young women studying in Meerut. It is therefore important to note that my account of youth politics and culture reflects conversations and participant observation with men supported by shallower field research among the young women I was able to interview.

One of the most notable features of the conversations I had with young men in Meerut was the frequency with which they discussed anxieties about time. During their school careers, young men worked under the close supervision of their parents and teachers. Teenagers were typically required to attend tutorials before and after secondary school, and parents reviewed their progress on a daily basis. By contrast, young men arriving in Meerut to study typically found little to structure their days. The British established a system of higher education in India that was organized around yearly written examinations and provided little scope for coursework (Kumar 1988; Spivak 2004). Many students in Meerut complained of an overabundance of time (see Jeffrey 2010). The following statement typifies the response of many young men to questions about their everyday lives: “Time has no value in India. Look about and you will see what we are doing, just timepass (passing time): maybe chatting on the roof, sitting about in [our] hostel room, wandering, chatting to friends, going to the tea stall, etcetera.” Hostel students had few opportunities to engage in organized recreational activity on campus and therefore spent most of their days somewhat self-consciously “doing timepass” at tea stalls or on street corners close to the campuses. They chatted, played games, caught up on news, or simply “did nothing,” a phrase I heard many times.

Timepass reflected gender inequalities in western UP. Young women were typically unable to participate in the types of public timepass in which young men engaged. In line with broader patriarchal ideas, professors, government officials, and parents imagined young men as, in essence, wayward and somewhat detached from daily tasks and young women as obedient and conscientious.

Parents, professors, and urban society at large considered it inappropriate for unmarried young women to “hang out,” except in certain public spaces, such as the new sweet shops and confectionary stores that had opened near MC and CCSU.

In addition to employing the term timepass to refer to passing surplus time, young men used this word to express their sense of detachment from college life: they imagined their studies as a form of “timepass”. The colonial educational regime privileged subjects and forms of teaching that bore little relation to students’ milieu. Syllabi in MC and CCSU were structured around the accumulation of facts and the memorization of information for examinations. Students also complained about a decline in the standard of higher education in Meerut in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s.

Students used the term “timepass” not only to reference their boredom and disengagement but also to convey feeling left behind in Meerut. Students contrasted their own timepass in Meerut higher education with the buzz of metropolitan India. MC students, especially, often led me through the campus pointing to signs of educational decay, such as the uneven wall around the cricket ground, half-built because the administration pocketed the money for its construction; the decrepit gymnasium, once the best facility in western UP; and the abandoned hostel near the center of campus, which was covered in undergrowth and garbage. What particularly galled many students was the contrast between such images of torpor and the signs of speed and globalization that surrounded the campus on all sides—the glossy signboards on the roundabout outside campus, for example, and the principal’s shiny sports utility vehicle parked near the administrative block.

Students’ common failure to find salaried work while studying in Meerut exacerbated their anomie. Most young men studying in CCSU and MC aspired to some form of government work in 2004 and 2005; they had grown up with the idea of serving the state, and government jobs are secure and well paid. The scale of the employment crisis in UP meant that students almost always failed to

acquire government positions. Although Jat students had considerable influence in Meerut district, especially within government bureaucracies, this no longer guaranteed state employment in an era of spiraling demand, and it could not deliver IT and outsourcing jobs in Delhi.

Rather than resigning themselves to a return to rural areas, where they might enter agriculture (in the case of Jats) or labor (in the case of most Dalits and Muslims), many young men reacted to their failure to acquire government work by cultivating identities as “unemployed youth” and simply remaining in college in Meerut, almost always as bachelors. The idea that studying is only a means of timepass was especially common among these men. Many longtime students told me that, whereas they had carefully weighed their options for their first degree, what they studied later was of little consequence. On several occasions, students said, “I am just studying *vaise* [haphazardly or without purpose].” Longtime students also had a more profound sense of being left behind than had students earlier in their college careers. Monthly or yearly college events—annual holidays, examinations, and the arrival of new students in the hostels, for example—imposed a rhythm on students’ lives, which, when placed alongside their sense of unstructured time, served as a nagging reminder of their predicament.

Discussions of timepass not only reflected young men’s frustrations, they were also implicated in youth cultures (see also Jeffrey 2010b). Timepass was a mode of self-fashioning and self-expression that bears comparison with the youth “cultural styles” described by scholars who worked in the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham in the 1970s (see Willis 1977; Hebdige 1979). Other work on cultures of young male idleness around the world points to the potential for male “hanging out” to create opportunities for cultural assertion (e.g. Chakrabarty 1999; Weiss 2002; Mains 2007). Dipesh Chakrabarty (1999) discusses various “spots” (*addas*) in urban West Bengal, often street corners or tea stalls, in which apparently listless young men meet to talk, play, and develop identities. Likewise, Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) argues that the young *tapori* (loafer) of

Bollywood films is often depicted as a hero who challenges received social categories through uncompromising behavior on the street. As the work of Chakrabarty and Mazumdar leads us to expect, in Meerut timepass occurred at various city “hubs” (*adda*) and involved young men in developing distinctive masculinities.

The Hindi word “*adda*” can mean meeting place, workplace, site, stand, station (for vehicles), or perch (for birds). In Meerut, young men tended to gather at hangouts which were connected to flows of traffic and information from outside the city. Around 8am and again in the evening, they often stood together at the main street intersection near the Meerut courts, near MC. In CCSU, they often congregated around a string of tea stalls on the major road near the university. These spaces of male social exchange provided *addas* in a double sense: a “meeting place” for unemployed young men keen to expand their networks of contacts and a “perch” from which young men could view the movement of goods, images and people in and out of Meerut. These spaces were also sites of social mixing in which men from different backgrounds developed friendships, including alliances across caste and religious backgrounds. The passing around of salty snacks and tea, and the movement of cigarettes from one mouth to another among Jats, Dalits, and Muslims, amounted to a temporary suspension of caste ideas of pollution through the sharing of food or contact with another’s saliva (see also Nisbett 2007: 940ff).

Unemployed young men were keen to distinguish their activities from those of working class youth in Meerut. The word timepass, because it is derived from an English word - “pastime” - suggested their distinction from working class cultures. Students often counter-posed an image of civilized, accomplished, purposeful “educated men” passing time about the city against a vision of ill-mannered, embarrassing uneducated men, standing about aimlessly. Such discourses recall Walter Benjamin’s (1973) distinction between the Parisian *flaneur*, an upper middle class wanderer and dilettante sampling the city’s delights, and the *badaud* (gawper), a working class rubberneck, who

becomes violently involved in the events he witnesses. In a somewhat similar manner, students depicted themselves as relatively intelligent and removed observers of urban scenes – the connoisseurs of *timepass* - and contrasted this self-image with a picture of slack-jawed uneducated youth. The prevalence of such ideas highlights the dangers of romanticizing timepass cultures, which also perpetuated caste and religious prejudices. For example, middle castes sometimes used the terms “uneducated”, “Dalit” and “Muslim” interchangeably when discussing the practices of the urban poor. Such prejudices also surfaced during moments of tension, for example where a cross-caste sexual liaison had come to light.

At the same time as distinguishing their timepass from that of the urban poor, unemployed young men also drew attention to the difference between their activities on Meerut street corners and the leisure practices of upper middle class students in the city. Young men spoke disparagingly about “silver spoon” or “high class” students from upper middle class, urban backgrounds, who had not been pushed into timepass but had the money required to engage in ostentatious forms of consumption, such as eating at the new metropolitan-style restaurants around the city.

Another reason why it is important not to romanticize *timepass* cultures is that they tended to reproduce exclusionary ideas about gender. Some young men made repeated references to sexual activity performed as a means of timepass or referred to the importance of “eve-teasing”, a euphemism for sexual harassment, as a means to pass time. In a manner that again recalls Benjamin’s discussion of the *flaneur*, others imagined themselves as judicious observers of “scenes” laid out for their titillation across Meerut (cf Abraham 2002; Osella and Osella 2000; Rogers 2008). Socially constructed meanings about gender and sexual difference were also embedded in the manner in which young men discussed the different places where they pass time in Meerut. Young men sometimes referred to a gender division of leisure between the starkly arranged tea stalls in which they most commonly hung out and the confectionary stores frequented by young women.

To summarize, *timepass* was Janus-faced; on the one hand it served as a means for young men to express their sense of loss in the context of the disappointments of higher education and protracted exclusion from salaried work. On the other hand, *timepass* offered young men a feeling of fun, social worth and lower middle class masculine distinction.

IV Collective mobilization

Lower middle class cultures of timepass served as a basis for political mobilization, much of it organized around the activities of youth political animators. There were a small number of Dalit and Muslim men who occasionally worked as animators on and around the campus. But the most important group of young men in terms of everyday politics on campus was a set of middle castes, who referred to themselves as social reformers.

There were between twenty and thirty self-styled middle-caste social reformers in Meerut College (MC) and Chaudhry Charan Singh University (CCSU) in 2004, and I interviewed nine of these men. Consideration of the experiences of a Jat young man named Vipin provides insights into their activities. I first met Vipin in MC in September 2004. He was in his early twenties at the time and came from a moderately prosperous farming family living in a village about 60 miles from Meerut. Vipin attended primary and secondary schools close to his rural home before enrolling in MC in 2000.

Vipin had no interest in contesting the elections that are regularly held for the CCSU student union. Nor did he aspire to political office. Indeed, with no apparent sense of irony, Vipin described himself as a “non-political politician”. Vipin explained that his actions cannot be equated with *rājnitī* (“politics”), which he defined as the self-interested competition for government posts, and *netāgiri*

(“leadership”), which denoted cultivating useful political contacts and building a student following for selfish purposes.

Much of Vipin’s energy went into instigating student demonstrations in MC. The specific character of these protests varied widely but they tended to address one or more of three themes. First, Vipin protested about the costs of higher education for students. In 2004, students were especially concerned about the expense associated with obtaining admission to higher education institutions affiliated to CCSU. Admission to private institutions with CCSU affiliation was organized such that fifty percent of places on courses were reserved for students with high merit in admissions examinations and the remaining fifty percent, termed the “management quota”, could be disbursed at the whim of a college’s private managers. In practice, even those high on the merit list had to pay large bribes to enter professional courses in private institutions, and the amounts that students had to pay for management quota seats were sometimes as high as Rs. 200,000, equivalent to the annual salary of a senior government high school teacher.

Second, Vipin protested about corruption (*bhrushtāchar*). Akhil Gupta (1995) has argued on the basis of field research in the 1980s in Bulandshahr district, UP, that ordinary people in north India tend to regard misappropriation of government funds by state officials as unacceptable, immoral and “corrupt”. Gupta (1995) shows that local people’s critiques of “corruption” are a central means through which north Indians articulate political goals, express their sense of marginalization, and define what they regard as acceptable state practice. My work in Meerut supports Gupta’s conclusions in many respects: students were eagerly involved in perpetuating a public culture of anti-corruption protest, where corruption was principally defined, as it is in much of the social science literature, as the abuse of public office for private gain. While middle caste social reformers and other students tended to regard all instances of university officials earning private money from their

positions as corrupt, they were especially infuriated when administrators' malpractice interfered with students' progress through higher education or their capacity to acquire jobs.

Third, Vipin and other social reformers launched protests against the harassment of students. Some of these protests referred to intimidation by traders in the city. In 2004, there was a street battle between students and shopkeepers in one of Meerut's main bazaars after a trader insulted a senior Meerut student. More commonly, students' vitriol was directed at the police. Police raids of college hostels in Meerut occurred as long ago as 1929, when the police invaded MC in search of "firearms and criminals" (Mittal 1978). By the 2000s, such raids had become a regular feature of university life, and students resented this invasion of their privacy. Young men were angry about the failure of the police to inform the university administration about raids, and they were equally furious about perceived police heavy-handedness. Simmering resentment boiled over in December 2002 when the police killed a student allegedly involved in criminal activity, and again in July 2004, when Vipin organized a student protest concerning the police's failure to investigate the murder of a MC student on campus.

A remarkable feature of the political protests instigated by Vipin was the extent to which they involved people from a variety of caste, class, religious, and, to a lesser extent, gender backgrounds. Middle caste social reformers often worked alongside politically motivated unemployed young men from the Dalit community on campus, for example to garner support in advance of a protest. They also often contacted upper caste (Brahmin and Rajput) students living outside of college and university, who frequently had good contacts in local newspaper offices and could therefore help to publicize a campaign. Moreover, young women, some of whom had connections high up in the district administration, often assisted with the most prominent student campaigns organized by middle caste social reformers. Reflecting this breadth of participation, Vipin and his peers paid little

attention to caste, religion and gender during their campaigns: “youth” as a political category overtrumped other forms of identification.

Vipin and other middle caste social reformers also engaged in informal political networking: energetic efforts to petition local officials to act in the students’ interests. On a typical day, Vipin might help a student to acquire a degree certificate by haranguing a university registrar, follow-up on a complaint against the police lodged by a classmate, and discuss the problem of guns on campus with the District Magistrate. In all these interactions, Vipin traded on his reputation for relatively selfless “service” and for being able to influence the hearts and minds of other students. Vipin’s political brokerage also occurred outside Meerut. Like other social reformers I interviewed, Vipin made regular trips to his village and surrounding rural areas to hold workshops among rural youth on social questions, especially unemployment, youth rights, and environmental issues.

Beyond these practical endeavors to assist other students and young people, social reformers also imagined themselves as cultural brokers. Vipin said that his action on behalf of students would play a type of pedagogic function in the college and wider society, illustrating for his peers the importance of working together to counter entrenched forms of power. Vipin was also concerned with the related challenge of instilling in students what C. Wright Mills (1959) called a “sociological imagination”: the capacity to link personal struggle with broader processes of social transformation. Vipin said that students in Meerut needed to recover the spirit of the nationalist movement, when students across India were imagined as having developed a shared sense of rights and responsibilities.

Notwithstanding the earnestness of several social reformers, a sense of irreverence and mischief often characterized student protest. For example, in CCSU in March 2005, students organized a “relay hunger strike” outside the main administrative block of the university, which involved students taking turns to fast for an hour each. At the end of each hour, supporters rushed to the

hastily constructed stage on which the hunger striker was sitting and crammed food into the mouth of the protester, who feigned hunger and faintness for comic effect.

Vipin was rather disinterested in trying to give institutional form to these vibrant forms of political mobilization. But three other social reformers had established a cell of the avowedly communist Naujawan Bharat Sabha (NBS) in 2004 to coordinate their work. These men had collected literature on the NBS, maintained contact with NBS cells in other colleges, and pasted photographs of the NBS hero, Bhagat Singh, around Meerut. Bhagat Singh (1907-1934), often referred to as “Shaheed (martyr) Bhagat Singh” was a freedom fighter influenced by communism and anarchism who became involved as a teenager in a number of revolutionary anti-British organizations. He was hanged for shooting a police officer in response to the killing of a veteran freedom fighter. A small group of social reformers in Meerut did much to promote the image of Bhagat Singh around the city.

Thus far my account resonates with Chatterjee’s (2004) discussion of political society in India. But, whereas Chatterjee emphasizes the uncouth and violent nature of the colorful subaltern protest he describes, I was struck by the civility of collective student mobilization in Meerut. This was evident during discussions with social reformers about their political tactics. Social reformers frequently said that the top officials in the district are people with a sense of fairness, who could be won round through making legally accurate arguments in a civilized manner. Students often told the District Magistrate (DM) and Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) about the misdemeanors of low-ranking state officials, policemen, or university teachers in the expectation that the high-ranking officer would intervene on students’ behalf. This appeal above the heads of lower officers is part of a wider genre of north Indian politics (see Corbridge et. al. 2005) and also had a strong performative element: students would pretend that they believed in the integrity of the DM or SSP in an effort to

ingratiate themselves with the higher official even where they knew that the officer was in cahoots with subordinates.

The legal acuity and urbanity of social reformers emerged even more clearly in the letters they wrote to top officials. Letter writing was a central means by which students chivvied representatives of the state. The letters made frequent references to legal norms and were also polite, grammatically correct, and written in a rather high-flown Hindi. The following letter composed by a friend of Vipin's for the District Magistrate in Meerut is indicative:

10th February 2005

Sir,

Time and time again, it has been evident that there are multiple irregularities (*aniyamitatāyen*) in the nature of admission to Bachelors of Education degrees at CCSU. Time and time again, various enquiries have been made. But there has been no public report. As a result, up until now, nothing has been fully satisfactory (*santoshjanak*). The affiliated colleges are receiving recognition from the university, and, at the same time, the university is not giving admission to those who have acquired entry through the proper mechanism; also, fees are being collected from students who have been admitted while there is nothing in the way of facilities within the institutions. The university administration has granted admission into its affiliated private colleges in the wrong way. [...] This must be evidence of collusion (*milibhaga*) between the university and the owners of the private institutions. Although fee collection is the responsibility of the university, the owners of the private institutions in league with the university are collecting greater fees. Finally, it is the demand of all

students that whether the private management, university or workers are at fault, strict action be taken against them. Otherwise, the students will be forced to launch a movement.

Yours,

United Students

Chaudhry Charan Singh University

Meerut

There were clear limits to such apparent respect for the law and proper conduct, even among social reformers, who were probably among the most genteel student agitators. Vipin and his fellow reformers occasionally tried to suggest through their tone and comportment that the failure of an official to cooperate might have violent consequences. Students and officials occasionally came to blows, most notably in October 2004 when some social reformers were caught up with university toughs in an attempt to punch senior CCSU officials, and “converted the VC’s office into a make-shift boxing arena” (*Amar Ujala* 10/04/2004).

Indeed, when student social reformers were unable to achieve their task through visiting university or government officials, they often engaged in public demonstrations of strength. They laid siege to the principal or VC’s office to prevent people from either leaving or entering the building (*gherāo*) or barred professors’ access to sections of the university to stop classes from taking place (*band*), for example. But students usually wanted to distinguish their actions from the violence they associated with the politics of “uneducated” sections of society. They also argued that violent and illegal protest would be needlessly risky.

In sum, students from widely different backgrounds sometimes came together to launch social protests or pursue their goals through informal political channels. This collective action reflected students' somewhat similar structural position within society—as people preoccupied by the problems of boredom, joblessness and educational decline—and a type of political commonsense among students wherein it was imagined that protests should be both fun and civilized.

Collective agitations were occasionally successful. Yet student political animators like Vipin were usually unable to generate sustained, widespread collective student protests in Meerut. This lack of success partly reflected a reluctance on the part of political parties to invest scarce resources in mobilizing students in Meerut in the context of the absence of a student union in Meerut's largest college. But the absence of collective mobilization also reflects the extent to which protests were undermined by middle caste student leaders – a point that comes across through reference to a young man named Girish.

V Double dealing

Twenty-eight in 2004, Girish came from a moderately prosperous rural Jat family owning 12 acres of land. His father had sent him to a private, English-Medium school on the edge of Meerut hoping that Girish would obtain a job outside agriculture, preferably within government service. But Girish repeatedly failed to acquire a salaried position.

In 2002 Girish moved to CCSU and began a political career. Between 2002 and 2004, he tried to establish a good reputation among his CCSU peers. Girish led populist demonstrations against malpractice within the university and lobbied the local state on behalf of other students. Girish obtained a senior post in the CCSU student union in October 2004.

In the six months after capturing this position, Girish slowly shifted the weight of his efforts away from campaigning around student issues and into accumulating money. Girish used his political position to act as

a broker between private educational entrepreneurs and the CCSU bureaucracy, and after three months in post, Girish had earned enough to purchase a car. Nor did Girish's influence end when his term on the student union expired. In March 2007, Girish was earning Rs. 8,000 a month – a reasonable salary in local terms – working as a political fixer for a Jat educational entrepreneur: he was especially active in trying to prevent student protests in a poorly-equipped engineering college established by the businessman.

Girish's case offers wider insights into the strategies of Jat student leaders. Jats have successfully dominated the CCSU student union. They captured these posts in part through developing a reputation for moral action among students. They launched high-profile protests against corruption within university and government offices and these were reported in favorable terms by friends within local newspapers. Student leaders also relied on caste solidarities to win power and received organizational support from political parties.

Like Girish, Jat student leaders usually abandoned their pretence to be assisting “the ordinary student” after winning the student union elections and devoted time instead to building social networks that would provide rapid economic profits. Student leaders could earn between 1 million and 1.2 million rupees in a single year in 2004-2005. They made this money in part through working as paid intermediaries between students and the administration, often assisting with admissions. They also worked as fixers for private educational entrepreneurs in their negotiations with CCSU. Student leaders lobbied CCSU university officials to grant affiliation to a private college and in return received the right to nominate applicants to seats in that college, which they could auction to the highest bidders. In addition, student politicians had some say over the disbursement of contracts for the construction of university buildings, and they made money that way, too. Student leaders redistributed a portion of their earnings to those who had financed their student union campaigns. They also invested money in fighting new student elections and hiring university professors to write Masters or Ph.D. dissertations on their behalf. After leaving their student union post, Jat politicians often used their social contacts to obtain permanent employment as university professors or advocates, jobs which they could combine with political activity.

Dalit political entrepreneurs in CCSU and MC sometimes attempted to challenge the power of Jat fixers through developing counter-networks of influence. They tried to establish rapport with government and university officials and they also wrote letters to senior government officials that outlined the extent and nature of Jat fixers' "corruption" (see Jeffrey 2008). But Dalits' attempts to improve low castes' access to resources and political power did little to alter processes of class and caste social reproduction within CCSU in the period between the late 1990s and mid-2000s. Jats continued to dominate access to the local state as a result of their superior access to economic capital for fighting union elections, social contacts with government officials and rural Jats, and capacity to use their educated status and middle caste demeanor to build relationships with local bigwigs. Several Jat young men said that being a Jat in Meerut is like possessing an "invisible license": a type of in-built and embodied capacity to generate good relations within the mainly middle/upper caste government bureaucracy akin to what Bourdieu (1984) terms *sens de placement*.

In discussing their political skill, Jat leaders argued in particular that they had become masters in the art of *jugār* (see Jeffrey 2009 for further discussion). In McGregor's Hindi dictionary *jugār* is defined broadly as "provisioning". But discussions of *jugār* frequently referred more specifically to a capacity to "fix things" through bringing together unlike practices or materials in a crafty manner. Jat young men commonly argued that the idea of *jugār* is encapsulated in the image of a rural bullock cart that has been fitted with a modern engine (*jugārī gāri*). One group of Jats also explained *jugār* by referring to a young man who, on waking in the morning, slips his feet sleepily into one smart leather shoe and one plastic sandal, because these two pieces of footwear just happened to be under his bed. In the political sphere, fixers often used *jugār* to either refer to situations in which they had improvised with available resources to achieve a particular goal or to denote more precisely instances in which they had combined "modern" and "traditional" materials to telling effect. For example, a Jat leader cited an occasion when he had used a rope bed to break the air conditioning system in a university official's room as an example of *jugār*. In another instance, a politician underlined his

improvisational skill by discussing how he had rigged up a speaker system in a tree during a political rally on the edge of the campus.

Student leaders more commonly elaborated on their capacity to do *jugār* with reference to the multiple “games” (*kheḷ*) which they play or “fields” in which they operate. They argued that *jugār* entailed identifying and learning about a wide variety of games, such as the game of obtaining a CCSU student union post, the game of negotiating with building contractors, and the game of taking a cut of money made from backdoor admissions through colluding with the VC in his office. There was a kind of recursivity built into Jat young men’s use of these terms such that the claim to be part of a game itself became a strategy within the game and a rationale for continuing to engage in game-like power plays (cf. Bourdieu 1984: 250-251; see also Knox et al. 2006). It was also evident that Jats extracted double profit from their ability to “play the game”: they obtained money and they acquired a sense of positive involvement in present events that served as an antidote to the frustrations of timepass.

For all their success Jat student leaders faced a dilemma: how could they on the one hand be involved in anti-corruption protests and, on the other, be hand in glove with local officials? Other students, especially Dalits, often depicted Jat student leaders as betraying a broader student cause.

Jats attempted to obscure their dealings in part through issuing denials. I frequently watched some of the most notoriously rapacious student leaders issuing bold challenges to their audiences at large public gatherings: “You tell me one instance in which I have been corrupt!” When students started listing examples, the student leader would dismiss their arguments as self-interested and false or accuse his opponent of failing to appreciate “true corruption” (*sabī bhrashtāchār*). These performances borrowed from the political styles of national-level politicians faced with accusations of malpractice and from images of bold “student activists” that emerge from Indian films, such as *Shiva* (1989) and *Yuwa* (2004).

In other instances Jats argued that they have no option but to engage in “corruption”. On many occasions, Jat student fixers told other students that they are effectively “trapped” or “bound in” (*band*

bona) within a complex set of obligations, practices and rules that make it impossible to “get things done” without bribing, flattering, and intimidating others. Jats also argued that, since everyone is involved in “the game” (*kbel*), there is no point outside the system from which others can critique their practices, and many leaders were able to recount instances in which Jat social reformers and Dalits had been forced to “play the game” (*kbel kbelna hai*).

In other situations, Jat student leaders made a distinction between their own “corruption”, understood here as institutionalized deviations from formal procedures that had become part of the taken-for-granted of everyday political life, and “fraud”, which denoted occasions in which officials took a bribe and refused to act or in which they came up with some novel practice that was not part of “normal” corruption. Thus, for example, student leaders said that they regularly colluded with the university registrar to raise students’ grades in examinations: “okay corruption” as one man quipped. But student politicians were outraged in August 2006 when it emerged that the registrar had been lining his pockets by arranging for CCSU Masters theses to be graded by school students as young as eight years old, an action of “basic fraud” which brought CCSU students into the streets to burn their degrees.

VI Conclusions

My paper has followed a central story. Many lower middle class young men in western UP in the mid-2000s faced long-term exclusion from the jobs they desired, and many responded to this situation by remaining in urban-based higher education for long periods. They often imagined themselves as people engaged only in “timepass” and developed lively cultures of “doing nothing” on street corners and at tea stalls around Meerut. A few unemployed Jat young men used these social links with other students to engage in democratic action: they launched student protests and petitioned government officials. Other politically-motivated Jat students developed identities as “fixers” or “leaders” and, while continuing to

protest against corruption, took advantage of novel opportunities for rent-seeking associated with the privatization of education in urban areas.

These conclusions advance our understanding of youth as political subjects in democratic India. Much recent research in postcolonial settings suggests that educated unemployed young men either engage in democratic political action (e.g. Krishna 2002), for example by acting as intermediaries between the rural poor and local state, or spearhead forms of reactionary class-based political activity, as where they become involved in clientelism and violence (e.g. Hansen 1996). The western UP example shows that unemployed young men may play both roles simultaneously. Jat political leaders were seeking ways to assist poorer students in their struggles with a predatory state bureaucracy and engaging in patron-client politics in order to enhance their own material interests. Indeed, for most Jat student leaders, the image of being a social reformer was an important staging post in their efforts to develop a position within clientelistic politics.

These conclusions also bear on broader debates about Indian democracy, especially on the influential work of Partha Chatterjee. I have identified two problems with Chatterjee's arguments about civil society and political society. First, my analysis shows that non-elites often make use of legal and civil tactics, as well as illegal and violent ones, in pursuing their political goals (see also Corbridge *et al.* 2004; Ghosh 2006; Baviskar and Sundar 2008). Second, in positing a broad division between the state and bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the masses, on the other, Chatterjee risks distracting attention from the strategies of lower middle classes, who are have become political agents in many regional settings (see Gupta 1995; Chatterjee 2004).

Bourdieu provides a more persuasive basis for understanding everyday politics in western UP. His writing highlights the significance of social connections and cultural resources in the strategies of class-differentiated youth. In addition, Bourdieu's emphasis on the habitus as a highly condensed generative mechanism for the transmission and storage of social power facilitates an understanding of how embodied

markers of caste and class advantage become effective within and across multiple fields of practice. Moreover, Bourdieu's conception of field resonates very well with how people in North-Western UP talked about politics, class and the state. Jats used the very idea of "field" (often using the English word) and related notion of "game" (*kehel*) to describe everyday political life. For unemployed young men, the spheres of higher education, government employment markets, student union politics, and the police, were some of the most crucial fields of competition (see Jeffrey 2010a for further discussion of these fields).

A central problem with Bourdieu's theoretical schema, however, is that it fails to account for instances in which people do not act according to self-maximizing, class-related logics. If aggressive individualism is the norm, why did some Jats eschew opportunities to make money from the local state and act instead as social reformers? Why, more broadly, did young men from markedly different backgrounds join together to produce cross-caste cultures of "timepass" and collective social protests? How, too, would one explain the somewhat mischievous character of young male cultures and politics - this seems difficult to square with the general tone of Bourdieu's work?

One response to these questions would be to point to the youth of Jat young men. Several anthropologists have argued recently that young people, precisely because they are often somewhat removed from wider society, may be capable of novel forms of action (see Bucholtz 2002 for a review). But such assertions risk caricaturing youth as in some sense innately "liminal" and "creative" (see Durham 2008).

A more plausible explanation for the cultures of timepass and collective student politics that I have described is that they arise out of the particular spatio-temporal experiences of Jat young men on campus: namely, their feelings of surplus time and of being left behind. There is an emerging literature, much of it based in Africa, on the cultural and political practices of groups of homosocial groups of young men "hanging out" on street corners (for example, Weiss 2002; Mains 2007 Ralph

2008). This work highlights the highly imaginative, often idiosyncratic strategies of urban youth (see Ralph 2008 in particular). Similarly, the experience of limbo in Meerut seemed to act as a seed-bed for the generation of somewhat novel youth cultures and political protests. Young men studying in Meerut began to imagine themselves as a lower middle class “group” precisely through hanging out together at tea stalls and on street corners. Reflecting the links between temporal anxiety and cross-class political action, collective protests often focused on issues related to time, such as the scheduling of examinations or speedy delivery of degree certificates.

It is not just that limbo created action across class lines. It also generated a particular mood among young men, a sense of mischief and merriment that ran through much of their activity. Robust horseplay, joking, and banter were sometimes most apparent, for example where young men traded humorous insults on street corners or made wry references to their capacity to improvise. At other moments, students used irony – recall the relay hunger strikes and bravado of student leaders such as Girish.

Analysis of the cultural and political practices of educated young men in western UP therefore requires a heterodox approach to theorizing everyday democratic politics. Bourdieu’s work on class reproduction needs to be read alongside analyses that foreground surprising examples of cross-class collaboration (e.g. Gupta 1995; Chatterjee 2004) and irony (Willis 1977). My appeal is for an organizationally and culturally inflected political economy approach to the study of Indian democracy, one resolutely attuned to the durability of class dominance and equally sensitive to counter-intuitive practices, such as the collective youth protests that sometimes flicker into life in contemporary urban UP.

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