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Timepass:

Youth, class, and time among unemployed young men in India

ABSTRACT

Unemployment among educated young men has become a central feature of globalization. In this article, I examine the experiences and strategies of unemployed young men in the north Indian city of Meerut. Many of these men complain that they are “just passing time” (doing “timepass”) in run-down government universities. But they also use this idea of themselves in limbo to fashion novel cultures of masculinity that partially bridge caste divides. I use a discussion of these young men’s predicament to argue for an ethnographically sensitive political-economy approach to the study of youth, culture, and neoliberal transformation, one attuned to both the durability of social inequalities and counterintuitive cultural practice. [*youth, India, class, time, politics, neoliberalism, masculinity*]

In 2005, I spent time with a student named Rajesh in Meerut College, north India.¹ Rajesh was in his early thirties and belonged to the middle-ranking Jat caste. Rajesh had more the appearance of a professor than a student: His hair was flecked with white, and crow’s-feet surrounded the corners of his eyes. Rajesh had been living in Meerut College for 13 years, during which time he had obtained a B.A., B.Ed., M.A. in political science, M.A. in history, M.A. in agriculture, and Ph.D. Like many longtime students in Meerut, Rajesh described himself as “unemployed,” someone “just waiting.” He had tried several times to obtain secure employment but repeatedly met with frustration; he said that he lacked the crucial social connections required to obtain a government job. I remembered Rajesh as a rather boisterous young student when I had lived in Meerut College in 1996. By 2005, he wore a hunted look: “What can I do but hope things will change?”

Rajesh’s sense of being engaged only in “timepass” also acted as a positive social identity, however. Rajesh and his friends often spent long periods on street corners, where they jokingly spoke of themselves as “useless people” or as men “hanging out with nowhere to go.” Paradoxically, claiming to be “useless” and to be engaged in only “passing time” had become a means through which young men could build youthful solidarities, sometimes across caste and class boundaries.

How is one to understand the situation and practices of young men like Rajesh? I address this question here by drawing on ethnographic research I conducted in Meerut, a provincial city in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh (UP), mainly in 2004 and 2005. I provide an ethnographic perspective on the relationship between economic reform in India and the temporal and spatial insecurities of marginalized young men.

A welter of research within anthropology and related disciplines examines how neoliberal economic change has unsettled people’s experience of time and space, for example, by accelerating social life (e.g., Harvey 1990:234; May and Thrift 2001) or instilling feelings of inertia and limbo

(Appadurai 2002; Bayart 2007; Katz 2004). There is also a growing literature on how young people are navigating contemporary social and economic uncertainties (Cole and Durham 2008; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000), and ethnographers have examined, in particular, affective and subjective dimensions of the lives of unemployed youth (e.g., Cole 2005; Mains 2007; Weiss 2009). This study contributes to wider work by highlighting the temporal and spatial anxieties of young men from middle-class and poorer backgrounds in near contemporary UP. By 2004–05, educational decay and a shortage of salaried employment had precipitated widespread feelings among young men of having surplus time, of being detached from education, and of being left behind—feelings commonly expressed by reference to the idea of “timepass.” I also make three more-specific contributions to broader accounts of unemployed young men, “new anthropologies of youth” (Bucholtz 2002), and literature on the relationship between economic change and temporal experience. First, I show how feelings of temporal rupture may become so intense in situations of economic crisis that time becomes a powerful feature of people’s discourse; timepass was a preoccupation of young men in Meerut. Second, I point to the multiple feelings of temporal disruption that may emerge in the context of socioeconomic transformation; in Meerut, in addition to surplus time and feeling left behind, young men also spoke of moments of panic and accelerated time. Third, I highlight the overdetermined nature of young men’s temporal anxiety, which reflected frustration about unemployment, exclusion from secure adulthood, and isolation relative to time-spaces of “modernity” and “development.”

I also examine the cultural and political practices that emerge out of the insecurities of young men such as Rajesh. Timepass was not only a form of social suffering but also served to promote somewhat inclusive young male cultures. Existing work on lower-middle-class youth suggests that those in this section of society may respond to the vicissitudes of neoliberal economic change either by exploiting their advantages vis-à-vis the poor, as the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu might suggest (e.g., Harriss-White 2003), or by joining with the poor to protest against the bourgeoisie and powerful institutions (e.g., Chatterjee 2004; Harriss 2003). Similarly, recent literature on educated unemployed young men from lower-middle-class backgrounds tends to present these men as either self-interested entrepreneurs exploiting their advantages relative to poorer groups (Hansen 1996) or instigators of broad-based social development (Krishna 2002). I argue that economic reforms in India have triggered both progressive and reactionary practice within a lower-middle class of students. Unemployed Jat students played an important role in the emergence of cultures of lower-middle-class timepass. Yet caste, class, and religious tensions fractured these cultures of young male idleness. Scholars of lower-

middle classes and of postcolonial youth need to hold in their minds simultaneously theoretical schemata that emphasize people’s recourse to narrow accumulative strategies (Bourdieu 1977, 1984) and those that stress creative, cross-class action (e.g., Cole and Durham 2008; Willis 1982).

In the next two sections of the article, I introduce broader literatures on youth, class, and time and outline the social position of Jats in western UP. I then consider Jat young men’s sense of temporal anxiety in two Meerut higher-educational institutions and the emergence of affirmative lower-middle-class masculinities built around the idea of “passing time.” In the conclusions, I reflect on the broader significance of my ethnographic work for an understanding of the relationship between economic transformation, temporal insecurity, and lower-middle-class youth action.

Ruptured futures: Lower-middle-class young men

Lower-middle classes, especially lower-middle-class youth, occupy a prominent political and social position in many parts of the global South. Lower-middle classes in poorer countries often include struggling indigenous elites created through colonialism (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1992), class fractions seeking to protect their access to state largesse in the face of the downsizing of the state (e.g., Harriss-White 2003), and entrepreneurs who have taken advantage of nation-building projects to separate themselves from the poor (e.g., Berry 1985; Fernandes 2006; Mawdsley 2004; Robison and Goodman 1996). What tends to unite these disparate classes is a shared anxiety about the possibility of downward mobility and a determination to exploit available resources to shore up their positions.

India provides a paradigmatic example of the growing salience of lower-middle classes. Leela Fernandes and Patrick Heller (2006) identify three tiers within the Indian middle classes: first, senior professionals and higher bureaucrats; second, a petit bourgeoisie that seeks to emulate the upper tier; and, third, low-ranking bureaucrats. Economic reforms have tended to bolster the position of Fernandes and Heller’s upper tier. The Indian state began a program of economic reform in the early 1990s that involved the dismantling of barriers to trade, liberalization of foreign direct investment, and attempts to reduce the fiscal deficit (often at the state level by cutting government spending; see Corbridge and Harriss 2000). Upper-middle classes were able to use their social connections and accumulated cultural capital, especially their mastery of English, to capture the most lucrative and secure positions that emerged in information technology (IT) and allied industries in the wake of liberalization (e.g., Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Van Wessel 2007). But economic reforms often jeopardized the position of Fernandes and Heller’s second and third

tiers—India's lower-middle classes—in the 1990s, by threatening their access to state rents and kickbacks, reducing the supply of government jobs, and undermining their ability to acquire state services, such as education and health care (Fernandes 2000; Harriss-White 2003).² At the same time, the state and media circulated images of “new middle-class” success. This disjuncture between image and reality generated a widespread sense among lower-middle classes of being “in limbo” (Favero 2005) or “waiting” (Fernandes 2004).

Threats to middle-class power in India in the 1990s and early 2000s were often particularly keenly felt by educated young people excluded from secure employment. Lower-middle-class young people commonly possessed the financial backing to obtain education but lacked the high-level social contacts and upper-middle-class skills to succeed within fiercely competitive markets for government jobs and positions in the new economy (see Fernandes 2000). In the context of prevalent male-breadwinner norms, lower-middle-class men were typically the most directly affected by unemployment. Official figures collected at employment exchanges and by the National Sample Survey (NSS) in India are poor indicators of unemployment because few people register themselves as unemployed. Nevertheless, according to NSS data, 12 million persons were openly unemployed in 2004–05. Nitin Desai (2007) suggests that in the same year, about 150 million persons were in low-quality employment, many of them young people with high school and college qualifications. Rates of employment in India's organized sector of the economy were stagnant in the late 1990s and early 2000s despite rapid economic growth in many parts of the country. Industrial and service-sector growth in India was skill- and capital-intensive during this period and did not generate large numbers of jobs. Sharp projected increases in the young adult population in the next ten years are likely to aggravate this unemployment crisis.³

Similar contradictions have been noted in other postcolonial settings. Substantial numbers of people in Asia, Africa, and Latin America have looked to formal schooling as a means of social mobility during the past 40 years, and they have been exposed via this education, the media, or development institutions to images of progress through education and entry into white-collar work (e.g., Levinson 1999; Mains 2007; Weiss 2009). At the same time, global economic changes since the 1970s have failed to generate large numbers of permanent white-collar jobs within manufacturing or service (Kaplinsky 2005). The result has been unemployment or “underemployment”: dependence on involuntary part-time work, intermittent unemployment, and involvement in poorly remunerated labor (Prause and Dooley 1997:245).

Scholars have started to uncover the anxieties of self-consciously “unemployed” young men in the 1990s and

2000s within and outside India, describing, for example, young men's inability to marry (see Masquelier 2005), purchase or rent independent living space (Hansen 2005), or conform to ideas of masculine success (Cole 2004; Osella and Osella 2000). An intriguing aspect of these recent ethnographies is their tendency to reference young men's anxieties about time. Unemployed young men may feel that they need to pass time in new ways in the face of their joblessness (e.g., Corrigan 1979; Katz 2004; Mains 2007). Indeed, time may become a central social preoccupation. Recent studies of educated unemployed young men that refer to discourses of temporal anxiety include Cindi Katz's (2004) account of Sudanese youth “marooned by modernity” and Daniel Mains's (2007) research in Ethiopia among unemployed young men, who told him that the only change they experience in their lives is watching the shadows creep from one side of the road to the other with the passing of the sun. The theme of temporal disorientation also runs through writing on India. For example, Gerard Heuzé (1996) argues that unemployed young men in provincial central India were haunted by a sense of limbo and “waiting.”⁴

As Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham (2008) have recently argued, young people's contemporary apprehensions about time must be contextualized with reference to changes over the *longue durée*. The onset of modernity in Europe and North America was associated with the institutionalization of chronological time (see Thompson 1967; Thrift 1996; Zerubavel 1985). Rather than operating according to seasonal rhythms, people began to measure their lives more closely with respect to abstract units of time, such as days, years, and decades. From at least the 19th century onward, and via development institutions in the postcolonial period, national governments and large capitalist organizations often imposed Western ideas of linear time in the global South (Postone 1993). In addition, the colonial and postcolonial project of “development” reconfigured notions of linear time in a potent manner (Gidwani 2008). Powerful institutions in the West combined the biological notion of “development” (the life-cycle of an organism) with evolutionary ideas to present a vision of social and economic development as a linear unfolding of progress (Cowen and Shenton 1996; Williams 1985). Western nations were presented as exemplifying the mature form of development for other countries to emulate, and countries in the global South were frequently perceived as occupying the “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty 2000:256).⁵

For young people in the global South, the symbolic violence of such visions of time has another dimension. In 19th- and 20th-century Euro-America, a formalization occurred of how societies imagined people should move through their biological lives, and increased emphasis was placed on distinct life “stages” (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Particular models of how social lives should be mapped onto chronological time became enshrined in new laws and

public institutions (Cole and Durham 2008:6): Childhood, youth, adulthood, and old age were formalized as distinct phases of life (e.g., Aries 1962). In addition, the notion of school trajectories and adult (usually male) working careers became ubiquitous (Wiener 1981). During the colonial and postcolonial periods, dominant institutions promoted these visions of social aging, which often replaced older models of how people mature or lent a new force to indigenous life-stage models (Osella and Osella 2000).

In the face of these multiple hegemonic temporalities, young men in the global South commonly experience their exclusion from secure salaried work as a triple temporal hardship. First, they are unable to obtain the social goods, such as a secure white-collar job, that connote “development,” as this is articulated by powerful institutions (e.g., Heuzé 1996). Second, they are incapable of moving into gendered age-based categories, especially male adulthood, and they come to be labeled or to label themselves “drop outs,” “failures,” or people “on the shelf” (Argenti 2005; Mbembe 2004; cf. Coupland 1991). Third, they cannot conform to dominant visions of how people should comport themselves with respect to linear time—they “miss years” or have “gaps” on their résumés, for example (Øian 2004).

Unemployed young men are not passive in the face of these threats to their self-belief; they frequently play key roles in processes of political change: developing novel cultural forms, instigating social movements, and working on an everyday level to pursue political goals. Some studies emphasize the reactionary, self-serving nature of unemployed young men’s cultural and political action, especially when these men are predominantly from middle-class families (e.g., De Vries 2002; Hansen 1996; see also Simone 2005). For example, Peter De Vries’s (2002) work on political brokerage in Mexico suggests that unemployed young men often use their educated skills to develop reputations as local political bosses and co-opt local state institutions. In a similar vein, Thomas Blom Hansen (1996) describes how exclusion from employment led lower-middle-class young men in Bombay in the 1990s to engage in anti-Muslim violence and extract rental incomes from the local state. In such work, the capacity of young men to rebuild respect in the face of joblessness rests in part on their inherited social connections: They possess “social capital” in Bourdieu’s (1986) terms. But the men described by Hansen, for example, also benefited from their cultural capital relative to the poor: their educational qualifications, ownership of consumer goods, and manners. Such cultural resources—which become durably inscribed in the minutiae of how young men move, eat, talk, think, and respond to social situations (their “habitus”)—allow relatively prosperous unemployed youth to avail themselves of various social “safety nets” (see Ortner 1998), obtain lucrative “fallback work,” often in the informal economy, or both. Indeed, this class advantage may be self-reproducing; success in man-

aging joblessness provides lower-middle-class young men with a type of cultural confidence—a “feel for the game”—that contributes to their ability to outcompete poorer unemployed youth (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Class, in Bourdieu’s terminology, must be imagined as the cumulative outcome of people’s struggles in different fields of social competition: It is a product of people’s agency rather than a structural position.

But this Bourdieuan take on youth practice in the face of unemployment distracts attention from the possibility that lower-middle classes among the unemployed may in certain circumstances seek common cause with unemployed young men who come from poor backgrounds, for example, to demonstrate against the state or engage in practices that unsettle entrenched social inequalities.⁶ As Karl Mannheim (1972:105) has argued, middle-class young people often forge connections founded on a shared generational sense of exclusion rather than act narrowly on the basis of their class interests (see also Cole 2005). Anthropological studies of youth in the global South provide corroborating evidence (e.g., Bundy 1987; Cole 2005; Harriss 2003).⁷ In an Indian context, Anirudh Krishna (2002) shows that unemployed young men from lower-middle-class backgrounds in Rajasthan and Gujarat in the 1990s often used their schooling to circulate cultures of intercaste cooperation and assist poor villagers in their dealings with the state.

Paul Willis, a lead figure in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), or “Birmingham School” of the 1970s and 1980s, offers concepts that are more open than Bourdieu’s to the political creativity of young people. Willis conducted research with working-class young men, but his arguments are relevant to understanding the social practice of youth more generally, including the unemployed. Willis (1977) built on his analysis of the everyday social practices of young men in a British school to stress the mutual interplay of creative agency and broader social structures in the emergence of youth cultural practices. In Willis’s terms, youth engage in cultural production: “the active, collective use and explorations of received symbolic, ideological and cultural resources to explain, make sense of and positively respond to ‘inherited’ structural and material conditions” (1982:112; see also Hebdige 1979). Willis also used his fieldwork to show that working-class young men in the school engaged in “partial penetrations” of dominant structures. On the one hand, the young men with whom Willis worked were capable of critiquing the class-based philosophies pedaled in school. On the other hand, working-class young men’s rebellious practices within school involved them in reproducing aggressive forms of heterosexual masculinity. Scholars commonly argue that recent poststructuralist writings have moved beyond Willis by dispelling the notion that youth cultural practices can be traced to underlying class logics

(Blackman 2005; Butler 1990). Yet Willis's (1977) notions of "cultural production" and "partial penetrations" anticipated some of the themes of poststructuralist work (see Willis 2003), for example, by showing that practices rarely cohere into fully formed "identities," emphasizing ironic and idiosyncratic dimensions of cultural practice (Demerath 1999; cf. Bakhtin 1986; Foucault 1988), and expanding analysis of politics to embrace questions of the body and emotions (e.g., Yon 2000; see also Blackman 2005).⁸ Willis's work encourages a search for lower-middle-class practices that are orthogonal to class or that challenge class power in addition to those that perpetuate social differences (see Arnot 2003; Willis 2003).

Placing the work of Willis alongside that of Bourdieu provides a basis for apprehending not only class-based behavior but also more counterintuitive cross-class practices. This openness to multiple social outcomes is especially important in UP, where lower-middle-class young men have responded to bewildering socioeconomic transformation in contradictory ways.

A Jat lower-middle class

UP's population may be roughly divided into three social blocs. Upper-caste Hindus (principally Brahmins and Thakurs) comprise roughly 20 percent of the population. These castes have dominated salaried employment, local government bureaucracies, and landownership in many parts of UP. A second bloc of households belonging to Hindu middle castes frequently controls access to political and economic power in rural parts of the state. This category of household includes the Jats, in the northwest, and Yadavs, in the southwest and east. The remainder of UP's population comprises mainly Muslims, Dalits (a term denoting ex-untouchables), and poorer sections of the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs): castes legally identified as above Dalits in the caste hierarchy but suffering from social and economic disadvantages. There are elites among Muslims and Dalits in UP. But Muslims, Dalits, and poorer OBCs typically possess few material assets and tend to work in exploitative and insecure conditions.

Jats often control landownership and access to local political power in western UP. The rise of Jats as an economic and political force in this region can be traced at least as far back as the 1850s (Stokes 1986). Colonial infrastructural projects in the mid- and late 19th century boosted the profitability of agriculture and therefore opportunities for Jat mobility (Stone 1984), and the British began to draft Jats into the army and local administration in the second half of the 19th century. But the main boost to Jat accumulation strategies came shortly after independence (Jeffrey 2001; Singh 1992). The introduction of new agricultural technologies between the 1960s and 1980s—the "Green Revolution"—increased the profitability of agri-

culture (Singh 1992). Moreover, the expansion of schooling in western UP provided rural Jats with an opportunity to educate their children in large numbers, first in government schools and, then, from about the early 1980s onward, in English-medium private schools (Jeffrey 2001). Rich Jat farmers, represented by the Jat politician Chaudhry Charan Singh, were also able to exert some influence over state government policy. Between the late 1960s and mid-1980s, Singh improved Jats' access to agricultural subsidies and government jobs (Byres 1988). At the local level, Jats were able to manipulate and sometimes capture local state agencies in western UP and, thus, acquire the lion's share of the development resources flowing into rural areas (Lerche 1999; Lieten 1996).

Yet Jats faced socioeconomic and political challenges in the 1990s. Most notably, liberalization threatened rich Jat farmers' position. To be sure, educated unemployment predates the 1990s reforms (e.g., Dube 1998; Singh 1992). It is also true that a crisis of educated employment in UP in the 1990s and early 2000s partly reflects demographic and social factors. The youth population rose markedly in the 1990s and 2000s—according to the 2001 census, there were nearly 50 percent more young men (21.9 million) in the age category 15–29 in UP than there were in the age category 30–44 (14.7 million) (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India 2004), and the rise in the number of educated youth was even more dramatic; in 1950, 50,000 people studied in college or university in UP, whereas by 2001, there were 1.3 million (Kingdon and Muzammil 2003).

It is therefore important not to present economic reforms as the only salient driver of socioeconomic change. But the liberalization of the Indian economy deepened problems of youth unemployment in UP in the 1990s and early 2000s for at least three reasons. First, economic reforms resulted in a marked slowdown in the creation of salaried jobs in UP (Chandrashekar and Ghosh 2002). In 2001, the World Bank made an annual 2 percent cut in the state's government employees a condition of its continuing aid to UP. At the same time, liberalization failed to generate private jobs. UP's gross state domestic product grew by only 1.3 percent per year during the 1990s, less than a third of the national average and less than the growth rate in UP in the 1980s (Ahluwalia 2001). Second, liberalization resulted in the increased circulation of images of middle-class urban success, encouraging a rising number of young people to seek "middle-class" jobs at a time when such employment was increasingly scarce. Since 1991, images of white-collar, middle-class success in provincial urban UP have proliferated on a vast scale, communicated, for example, via billboards, televisions, and newspapers. Third, liberalization undermined education and therefore possibilities for young people to establish businesses or migrate in search of skilled, well-paid jobs. Until the early 1990s, the state had expanded its financial support for government

schooling and universities. During the 1990s, however, the UP government withdrew from its commitment to education (Mooij and Dev 2002). With the exception of a small number of elite state colleges, government schools and colleges usually lacked teaching aids and equipment, catering facilities, and basic amenities (CABE 2004; Kingdon and Muzammil 2003). Private entrepreneurs attempted to meet parental demand for education, but the schools and colleges they established were, on the whole, poorly regulated, staffed, and funded (Jeffery et al. 2005). At the tertiary level, there was a widening gulf in UP in the 1990s and early 2000s between a thin upper stratum of higher-educational institutions offering internationally acclaimed qualifications—such as the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kanpur—and the mass of poorly funded government and private institutions catering to the majority of the population, including most Jats.

Jats also faced threats to their political dominance in the 1990s: The rise of the pro-Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) presented something of a challenge to Jats' influence over state-level politics and local-level state agencies.⁹ The BSP tried to raise the political, economic, and social standing of Dalits by transforming the symbolic landscape of UP to reflect Dalit pride and increasing Dalit representation within government bureaucracies (Jaffrelot 2003). The emergence of the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) potentially offered Jats a medium for expressing political goals in the face of a Dalit challenge. The BJP held power in Lucknow three times between 1990 and 2005 and governed India between 1999 and 2004. But the BJP gave most visible expression to the ambitions and anxieties of UP's urban classes and the upper castes, with whom rural Jats had little in common. Jats' relatively secular outlook meant that Hindu nationalist political representatives were often unable to mobilize this caste around the agenda of the Hindu Right in the 1990s in western UP (Gupta 1997:84).

To summarize, postcolonial UP has witnessed the consolidation of a prosperous lower-middle class of Jats. By the mid-1990s, however, Jats faced threats associated with demographic change, the liberalization of the Indian economy, and the rise of low castes.

I have been conducting research in western UP since 1995 (e.g., Jeffrey 2000, 2002; Jeffrey et al. 2008). Here I draw primarily on research conducted in 2004 and 2005 on how self-consciously "unemployed" Jat young men were responding to economic and political challenges. I also interviewed Dalit and Muslim students who were poorer than Jats and had less local political influence. I carried out this research in two government-funded institutions: Chaudhry Charan Singh University (CCSU), with an enrollment of 2,600 students, and Meerut College (MC), with 16,000 students.¹⁰ In CCSU and MC, the standards of education and job prospects of graduates were well below those of north India's IITs. In both CCSU and MC, students were

mainly from rural areas, and men outnumbered women roughly two to one. The official figures I obtained from the CCSU and MC offices indicated that upper castes made up approximately 15 percent of the student body in the two institutions, middle castes (mainly Jats) about 50 percent, and Muslims, Dalits, and other lower castes roughly 35 percent.

Suffering timepass

During their school careers, young men worked under the watchful gaze 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 had established a system of higher education in India that was organized around yearly written examinations and that provided little scope for coursework (Kumar 1988, 1994; Spivak 2004). Students in Meerut obtained the majority of their knowledge in the period immediately preceding examinations from textbooks, often written by their professors.

Many students therefore complained of an overabundance of time; they imagined time as something that needed to be "passed" or "killed" (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*: maybe chatting on the roof, sitting about in [our] hostel room, wandering, chatting to friends, going to the tea stall, etcetera."

Not all young men studying in MC and CCSU agreed. Some referred to being too engaged in their studies to worry about timepass. Others said that time often moves too fast on campus. They complained of having to galvanize themselves into action at short notice in pursuit of a textbook, examination paper, or result; a language of "cramming," "rushing," and an absence of time existed alongside ideas of timepass. But the notion of being surrounded by an expanse of featureless time was prevalent among young men in Meerut. Discourses of timepass acted as a type of "structure of feeling" in Raymond Williams's (1977) sense of a social consciousness that gives a distinct form to people's actions and sense of their place in the world.

Hostel students had few opportunities to engage in organized recreational activity on campus and therefore spent most of their days somewhat self-consciously "passing time" 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 confectionery stores that had opened near MC and CCSU.

In addition to employing the term *timepass* to refer to passing surplus time, young men used the term to express their sense of detachment from their studies. 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 and 1990s. In 1996, I had heard teachers and students in MC and CCSU refer to problems in local higher education, linked to a shortage of government funding and the growth of private educational institutions. By 2004, their despondency had deepened. A further withdrawal of funds for higher education in UP, combined with irregularities in educational administration, meant that classes in MC were often short, infrequent, and poorly organized. Extracurricular activities and educational facilities were almost nonexistent. Conditions in CCSU were slightly better: Several CCSU departments had used profits from private courses to improve facilities in core disciplines. Yet the quality of education and reputation of CCSU declined rapidly after the late 1990s, as evident in a sharp drop in the enrollment of students from outside UP and a wave of negative media reports regarding the institution. It was precisely an awareness of Meerut’s low position within global hierarchies of education that led many men to emphasize their detachment from their university—study was only timepass.

Students used *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 northwestern 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 sport utility vehicle parked near the administrative block. Young men imagined

the physical landscape of Meerut College, like the forlorn waiting rooms that abut government offices, clinics, and railway stations across north India, to be removed from the spaces “where things are happening.”

Other studies that have referred to the idea of “timepass” in India have tended to emphasize leisure and pleasurable distraction (e.g., Abraham 2002; Nisbett 2007). In these accounts, based usually on metropolitan India, *timepass* connotes a welcome period of rest conducted between bouts of work. But students in Meerut commonly spoke of timepass in a downhearted manner. Timepass was what one had to do because more meaningful ways of engaging with the world were unavailable.

The melancholy that characterized young men’s discussion of timepass also reflects public disapproval of young male idleness. Parents’ anxieties over their sons’ futures, combined with professors’ concerns, had led to the emergence of a public discourse in which young men were imagined as “loitering.” The media played a large role in disseminating such ideas; the college layabout was a stock figure of local newspaper articles. Stories focused especially on the criminal and sexual threat allegedly posed by idle men and on the vulnerability of the male body to evil influences from outside the region, especially “Western” ideas about sex.

Concern over male timepass came to a head in Meerut in December 2005, when Meerut police beat young men and women allegedly engaged in “lewd behavior” in a public park close to MC. The attacks formed part of a larger effort—codenamed “Operation Romeo”—aimed at countering young male sexual harassment of young women and at cleansing public space. But students were adamant that the couples had simply been “talking and holding hands” and were quick to make accusations of police brutality. Commenting on the incident in 2007, a police constable in Meerut said, “Those who hit the young people were wrong, but the public are fed up with idlers.”

Students’ common failure to find salaried work while studying in Meerut exacerbated their feelings of boredom, detachment, and being left behind. Students at all stages of their college career were apt to talk about timepass, but those who had tried and failed to get middle-class jobs and who remained in higher education for long periods spoke most readily and passionately on this theme.

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. There was a consensus among students, professors, and state officials that a small self-perpetuating clique of families had good access to jobs in the military, education, and government health care and that outside of this closed elite was a vast

sea of frustrated young people and parents. In his study of unemployment in Ethiopia, Daniel Mains (2007) refers to some young people's ability to migrate in search of work. A few very well connected Jats had managed to find jobs by moving to major cities in India. But the majority of Jats, as well as Dalits and Muslims, lacked the personal contacts, English-language skills, and IT training required for entry into well-paid private jobs in metropolitan India, and they also lacked the large amounts of money and social connections that are prerequisites for international migration. 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 resign 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. They continued to prepare for government exams and accumulate qualifications, often until their late twenties or even early thirties. These young men typically described themselves as "youth" (*jawān*).

Remaining in higher education was expensive, and, ultimately, young men from all backgrounds had to leave school: Jats typically entered private service or farming, Muslims usually moved into skilled artisanal work within the informal economy, and Dalits often entered manual wage labor or poorly paid private service. But before reconciling themselves to such work, young men spent a good deal of time hanging out and acquiring degrees.

The failure to acquire secure salaried work not only threatened young men's social and economic standing but also jeopardized their ability to marry and thereby fulfill locally valued norms of adult masculinity. The parents of young men unsuccessful in government employment examinations found it difficult to find brides for their sons. Parents of young women typically wanted to marry their daughters to young men with stable jobs. Ninety-four percent of men living in four hostels in MC and two hostels CCSU that I surveyed were unmarried, and most of these men said that they were unlikely to marry in the next five years.

Large numbers of young men in Meerut studied for several degrees in succession while also searching the informal economy of educational credentials for other sources of distinction. Many began by studying for a B.A. or B.Sc. at MC and then enrolling in CCSU for master's-level qualifications. Others accumulated bachelor's and postgraduate qualifications in one of the government-funded colleges affiliated with CCSU, such as MC. Of the 245 young men in my survey of MC and CCSU hostels, 64 percent had already

acquired at least one degree, and 43 percent had obtained two or more.

The acquisition of successive degrees acted to some extent as a prophylactic against the hardships of perceived unemployment; students felt that they were proceeding, through small steps, toward a definite goal. At the same time, however, most longtime students recognized that additional degrees were unlikely to increase their employability. Indeed, they argued that, at a certain point, additional educational credentials diminish one's employability: They referred to being "overeducated." 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]."

Young men often knew that they were likely to face a protracted, possibly profitless search for employment when they arrived in Meerut. But students tended to believe that patience and hard work might land them in the lucky minority who did obtain a secure government job. And parents, whose knowledge of government job markets was mainly acquired in the 1970s and 1980s, encouraged young men to hope.

Thus, many longtime students in Meerut contended with linked forms of temporal anxiety: concern over a lack of fulfilling distractions, provincial educational decay, and perceived unemployment. What did they feel about this situation of apparent limbo? A few longtime students remained optimistic. Two young men at MC believed fervently that the processes of economic development occurring in Delhi would spread to Meerut. At the other end of the spectrum were young men who had seemingly lost all sense of a viable future in the face of repeated disappointment in the job market and a more general sense of limbo in Meerut. Four young men whom I interviewed, three of them Jats and one Yadav, were dependent on opium and alcohol. Jats' history of working in the army meant that they had longer experience of contact with liquor than had Dalits and Muslims, and alcoholism was becoming common in the Jat community. Three young men, two Jats and one Dalit, killed themselves in the 1990s and early 2000s in colleges affiliated with CCSU.

Yet most longtime students were neither brightly optimistic nor wholly dispirited. Rather, they were ambivalent about their position in society. They were despondent about their situation and cynical about any attempt to plan for the future. But they also retained a sense that, if they could just hold out long enough, a job might materialize in the end.

Longtime students had a stronger 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—imposed a rhythm on students' lives, which, when placed alongside their sense of unstructured time, served as a nagging reminder of their predicament. Many of my informants said that they had developed an "inferiority complex" (*hīn bhavnā*), in which they contrasted their own timepass with the purposeful activity of those who had managed to get jobs, marry, and make money.

The importance of ideas of being left behind became especially evident to me in October 2004, when I was chatting with students over hot milk at a busy junction outside the Meerut law court. I was describing an interview I had given with a local journalist about British unemployment. One of the students present responded by telling a story, one I heard many times. The story centers on two characters: Rampal, a man in his late thirties, who is studying in MC, and Jaibir, a former classmate of Rampal's, who has obtained a prestigious job in the Indian Administrative Services. Both men are lower-middle-class Jats. As the story goes, Jaibir comes back to Meerut every so often to see relatives and friends. The first time he returns, he has recently acquired a position as a subdivisional magistrate. He sees Rampal outside the MC gate and asks him what he is doing. Rampal replies, "Well, I'm studying and doing a little student politics." Five years later, Jaibir has become a district magistrate in south India. He returns to Meerut, notices Rampal again outside the college gate, and asks him how he is getting on. Rampal replies, "Well, I'm studying and doing a little student politics." Another five years pass, and by this time Jaibir has secured the lofty position of commissioner and traveled outside India. Again, Jaibir comes back to Meerut, sees Rampal beside the college gate, and asks him, "What's happening?" Rampal replies, "Well, I'm studying and doing a little student politics."

Lower-middle-class masculinities

Might Rampal actually be "powerful" in any sense? Many students said that Jaibir embodies achievement; "Jaibir is Jaibir, Rampal is Rampal, one is successful, one is a flop" was the type of response I heard several times. When students told this story, those in the audience would often move their thumbs from side to side when Rampal's name was mentioned, a gesture that suggested underachievement. But other students offered different views. One said, "Jaibir is more successful, but Rampal is more experienced." Another student averred, "Jaibir has become a snob . . . Rampal is a type of hero."

These comments suggest that timepass is not only an expression of social suffering but also something else: perhaps a form of self-expression somewhat similar to the youth "cultural productions" studied by Birmingham School scholars (see also Jeffrey 2010). In a manner reminiscent of the young men smashing milk bottles on the damp pavements of 1970s Sunderland, described by Paul Corrigan

(1979), young men in Meerut seemed to proclaim, "We've nothing much to do, but you better notice us."

Other work on cultures of young male idleness points to the importance of "hanging out" as a context for the fashioning of distinctive masculinities (e.g., Chakrabarty 1999; Nisbett 2007; Simone 2005; Weiss 2009). For example, Brad Weiss (2009) describes the importance of particular sites of apparent male apathy—especially barbershops—in the efforts of unemployed or underemployed young men to remake urban public space. In India, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1999) identifies varied culturally important spots (*addās*) in urban West Bengal, often street corners or tea stalls, in which apparently idle young men have crafted nodes of masculine conviviality. Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) has argued that the *taporī* (loafer) of Indian cinema is often imagined as a hero: someone challenging entrenched social ideas through the display of an uncompromising street masculinity. The work of Weiss, Chakrabarty, and Mazumdar resonates with the Meerut conjuncture. Timepass in western UP occurred at city hubs (*addās*), involved young men in developing affirmative youth cultures, and frequently entailed a type of defiant public admission of failure on the part of young men: "We haven't got work but you must notice us," they seemed to say.

Young men gathered at sites of urban exchange and travel that offered them the opportunity to display their unemployment and hear news. Outside MC, educated unemployed Jats and jobless Dalit and Muslim young men often congregated at the main street intersection near the Meerut courts. In CCSU, they gravitated toward a string of tea stalls on the road that runs along the edge of the university. The tea stalls outside CCSU and MC, as in many other areas of provincial north India, typically consisted of worn wooden tables and hard plastic chairs or straight-backed wooden benches. Their dirt floors were typically covered with cigarette butts and garbage. In summer, the tea stalls were intensely hot, and in winter they were exposed to the cold winds that blow through the UP plains. In these somewhat inhospitable spaces, young men traded stories, argued, and talked about sport, films, and current affairs. They smoked, drank tea, engaged in horseplay, and lounged around with their arms interlinked. Chakrabarty (1999) defines *addā* as a meeting place, but the word can also mean workplace, stand, parking place (for vehicles), or perch (for birds). The spaces of male social exchange frequented by Meerut students constituted *addās* in at least two senses: as meeting places for unemployed young men keen to expand networks of urban sociality and as "perches" from which they could view goods, images, and people moving around the city.

The urban *addā* was also important in allowing young men from unlike backgrounds to develop social bonds. I was repeatedly struck by everyday gestures of friendship between diverse young men: Ordinary actions such as passing

round a snack or lighting each other's cigarettes hinted at a cultural substratum of male solidarity. Others have described the emergence of an egalitarian spirit among small groups of young men who "hang out" (e.g., Mains 2007; Vale de Almeida 1996; Weiss 2009). What was perhaps distinctive in Meerut was the extent to which men partially disregarded caste and religious boundaries. The sharing of salty snacks and tea and the passing of cigarettes from one mouth to another among Dalits, higher castes, and Muslims amounted to a suspension of caste ideas of pollution through the sharing of food or contact with another's saliva (cf. Nisbett 2007:941). The relatively secular orientation of Jats might lead one to anticipate such interaction. I was, nevertheless, surprised by these examples of young male camaraderie; previous research I had conducted in rural Meerut district uncovered middle-caste discrimination against Dalits (Jeffrey 2000, 2002), and Paul R. Brass (1997) records students' involvement in religious communal violence in Meerut in the 1980s. Young men's *addā* relationships were fairly creative forms of "cultural production" (Willis 1982).

To make these points is not to suggest that tea-stall cultures were always harmonious. Caste and religious differences and prejudices constantly threatened to rupture shared cultures of young male timepass. Tensions became especially palpable when an interreligious or cross-caste sexual relationship became a matter of public knowledge. In particular, attempts by Dalit or Muslim young men to court Jat young women typically generated bitter hostility among Jat youth and a wave of accusations, fighting, and recrimination (cf. Rogers 2008). But such incidents were relatively rare while I lived in Meerut in 2004 and 2005—mutual understanding based on a shared sense of unemployment was more common.

Humor, horseplay, and banter featured prominently in young men's timepass activities, as it did in the male street cultures studied by Corrigan (1979) in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, and joking and spirited mischief were crucial to cross-caste and cross-class *bonhomie*. Many of the jokes displayed a self-deprecatory wit, laid on partly for my benefit, in which the hardships of being young and unemployed in provincial north India were offered up for ironic reflection. In several instances, students referred to themselves semihumorously as "*bekār*," a word that might be translated as "not at work" but also suggests "uselessness." At other moments they referred to themselves as people "doing nothing" or "doing something or other," and then they laughed at my fumbling efforts to ascertain what this "nothing" or "something" might mean. The idea of wandering also provided a basis for humor. Students often drew out the long *oo* sound of the Hindi word for "moving about"—*ghūmnā*—while sweeping their hands through the air to suggest their aimless drift through the city. The notion of "timepass" itself was also a focus for hu-

mor. Jokes often sprang from how young men deployed the antonyms *timepass* and *serious*. During a discussion outside MC, a Jat student generated much laughter when he distinguished between "serious" and "timepass" girlfriends (see also Abraham 2002). Young men generated laughter through "reverse speak" (*ulte bolte*), for example, describing activities that were evidently serious—such as going to hospital or interviewing for a job—as simply timepass. The rather illicit nature of young men's idleness made discussions of timepass especially funny and a particularly good basis for generating cross-caste and cross-class alliances. Students' stories of timepass operated as a type of "intimate culture" (Herzfeld 2005): a feature of social life regarded as somewhat embarrassing when exposed to outsiders but viewed by insiders as a basis for building community spirit and trust.

Students also spoke of timepass as a skill and source of knowledge. As people spending long periods occupying nodes within the city, many young men said that they had learned a great deal about urban life. In particular, they said that they are able to bestride a provincial space, which they equated with their rural homes and small-town western UP, and the modern world, which they associated not primarily with the West but with images, knowledge, and ideas that came from Delhi. Many unemployed students demonstrated a type of "subaltern cosmopolitanism" (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003); they imagined themselves as poised between two spheres—rural UP and metropolitan India—and uniquely able to straddle these distinct spaces. Timepass was not a passive activity: It offered an opportunity to convey a youthful adaptability to circumstances.

Students also sometimes argued that the cultivation of the skill of "hanging out" in Meerut had become such a mainstay of their everyday life as to constitute a "job" (*kām*)—and it is useful to recall here that *addā* can mean "workplace." In developing this notion, they referred to the multiple benefits (*fāydā*) associated with spending long periods at urban nodes. For example, young men said that, as they have engaged in timepass, they have come to appreciate the varied ways in which people dress, speak, and move around in Meerut. Young men also said that, by hanging out, they obtain information that may be of use in the future, for example, regarding new job openings or local political shenanigans. In 2004, I interviewed four young men whom I had known in 1996 and who had obtained government jobs, and they all remembered urban timepass as a period during which they cultivated useful social contacts and acquired information relevant to their quest for employment.

Addās were also seedbeds for occasional public protest—and, again, this occurred across class, caste, and religious lines and thus further cemented unemployed male solidarities. Student mobilization occurred not via student political organizations but through the quotidian attempts

of diverse political animators to galvanize students into action, often at tea stalls and street corners. There was no obvious hierarchy among the political animators, many of whom styled themselves “social reformers” and tended to recognize each other’s strengths as politicians rather than dwelling on the specifics of class or caste background. Jat, Muslim, and Dalit politicians were often adept at working together: whipping up enthusiasm among other students, erecting roadblocks, staging strikes, or delivering carefully worded letters of protest to high-up city officials. When I asked many students why they spent long periods protesting in the city or on campus, a common response was that demonstrating was “fun” (*mazā*) and a means of developing diverse friendships. A language of youth or student rights (*haq*) permeated young people’s agitations, and protests usually focused on challenges facing students as a whole—such as corruption within university bureaucracies, unemployment, and officials’ harassment of students—rather than on topics pertaining only to particular castes, classes, or religious groups. Even when collective protests were short-lived—and they often dissipated quickly in the face of counterresistance by university officials and strong-armed policing—they left certain traces on the Meerut social landscape that could provide part of the inspiration for future cross-caste, interreligious struggles: graffiti complaining about university bureaucrats’ negligence, photographs of collective student protest circulated by newspapers, and stories of student heroism that became enshrined in the memories of particular addā communities.

Exclusions

Young men’s timepass cultures should not be romanticized, however; they rested on exclusionary ideas about class, caste, and gender. Most noticeably, students from all caste and class backgrounds, even the Dalit poor, were keen to distinguish their style of hanging about from that of working-class young men in Meerut who lacked a university education. The word *timepass*, because it is derived from *pastime* and suggests some familiarity with English, suggested separation from working-class urban cultures. Unemployed young men studying in Meerut often referred to themselves as “middle class” (in English), people distinguishable from the poor (*garīb*) by birth and education, in the case of most Jats, or by education, in the case of Muslims and Dalits. Students often elaborated on this idea by counterposing an image of civilized “educated men” passing time about the city against a vision of embarrassing and ill-kempt illiterates engaged in useless loitering. These discourses of male idleness bear comparison with the distinction Walter Benjamin (1983) made between the Parisian *flâneur*, a middle-class wanderer who judiciously and impassively samples the city’s delights, and the *badaud* (gawper), a working-class rubberneck who becomes emotion-

ally and violently involved in the events he witnesses. In a somewhat similar manner, students imagined themselves as intelligent, unflustered observers of urban life and spoke of illiterates as slack-jawed, easily riled buffoons—the lowest common denominators of urban street culture. Such narratives allowed students to deflect public criticism of their idleness onto a set of youth—urban “illiterates”—who they felt were the ones really wasting time (and they sometimes distinguished between “timepass” and “timewaste”). But discussions of uneducated behavior sometimes unsettled the sense of male solidarity established within addās across the city. Jats occasionally used the terms *uneducated*, *Chamar*, and *Muslim* interchangeably when discussing the characteristics of the urban poor. Such statements occasionally passed unremarked. At other moments, Dalits and Muslims walked away, muttered objections, or openly countered higher castes.

At the same time that they separated their practices from those of the allegedly uncivilized urban poor, students also drew attention to the difference between their timepass and the leisure practices of upper-middle-class students in the city. Young men spoke disparagingly about “silver-spoon,” “high-class,” or “upper-class” students: those from upper-middle-class, urban backgrounds who had not been forced into timepass but had the money required to engage in ostentatious leisure practices, such as eating at the new metropolitan-style restaurants around the city. Among Jats, these discourses sometimes had a caste element. Jats used the terms *upper classes* and *Brahmin people* interchangeably in their diatribes against the very rich. Young men’s disdain for upper-middle-class student cultures emerged especially clearly during a discussion of a locally available snack called “Timepass,” which was launched in 2001 by Britannia Industries, a large Indian corporation. Advertisements for the Timepass snack featured smart university students tossing chips into their mouths at various urban addās. Britannia was clearly targeting a youth market. But most of the young men with whom I worked lacked the money to buy Timepass, and they perceived the snack to be a symbol of the wasteful leisure of upper-class, upper-caste students.

Young men’s sense of their distinctiveness relative to upper-middle-class students strengthened a feeling among Jats, Dalits, and Muslims that they belonged to a “middle class.” And yet this aspect of addā culture also created tensions within groups of self-consciously unemployed students. A few Jats in CCSU and MC had managed to use their money, local social networks, and cultural capital to find lucrative jobs in the local informal economy, either as salespeople for new corporations in the city or as small-scale entrepreneurs, for example, running cybercafés. These men had often earned enough to purchase expensive consumer goods and hang out at the new Delhi-style shopping malls that opened in Meerut in the early 2000s as well as at the

tea stalls and street corners close to CCSU and MC. In addition, some self-consciously unemployed young men studying in CCSU and MC had developed a political reputation in college or university and used their standing among other students to make large amounts of money within local networks of corruption, often as much as Rs. 1 million (roughly \$25 thousand) a year—even while they continued to define themselves as unemployed (see Jeffrey 2009). These student leaders, most of them Jats from relatively wealthy backgrounds, often acted as intermediaries between students seeking places at new private colleges in Meerut and private educational entrepreneurs. They also assisted those running private colleges in obtaining the official permission required to open new educational institutions. Young men often regarded Jat student leaders as having betrayed a broader student cause through their dealings with entrepreneurs and university officials. In 2004 and 2005, a divide was opening up between, on the one hand, Jats who had managed to develop successful entrepreneurial careers within business and politics and, on the other hand, the majority of students who lacked the money, social connections, and cultural capital to engage in graft. But it is important to note that even the “successful” Jats continued to spend portions of their day at tea stalls and street corners—Jat politicians, especially, needed the support of their unemployed peers. Tensions sometimes surfaced at Meerut addās between lower-middle-class students and proto-upper-middle-class students who were making a fast buck. Quarrels also developed between Jat politicians and politically active Dalit students, who, inspired in part by the BSP, tried to undermine Jat student leaders’ power by establishing their own social contacts within local state bureaucracies.

Another reason to avoid romanticizing timepass cultures is that they tended to reproduce exclusionary ideas about gender. A hypermasculine bravado often characterized young men’s practices at tea stalls and street corners (cf. Rogers 2008). Some young men made repeated references to sexual liaisons that were performed as timepass. Others referred to the importance of “eve-teasing,” a euphemism for sexual harassment, in countering boredom. Still others spoke of young women students in objectifying terms, for example, as “features,” in the sense of “landscape features.” Male students sometimes said that, as educated people, they have the right to wander the campus in search of these “features,” stopping to appreciate beautiful young women or trade “frank talk.” These self-constructions resonated with Benjamin’s description of the Parisian flâneur; young men projected an image of themselves as expert observers of multiple “scenes” laid out for their titillation and delectation across urban space (cf. Abraham 2002; Osella and Osella 2002; Rogers 2008). By cultivating personas as promiscuous timepass men or detached observers, the unemployed further entrenched assumptions about

the respective roles of young men and young women in Meerut.

Gendered ideas were also embedded in how young men discussed diverse addās around Meerut. Male students alluded to a gender division of leisure between the stark tea stalls in which they most commonly hung out and the more elaborately decorated confectionery stores used by young women. The substances consumed in these different places were ascribed particular gendered meanings. Young men sometimes imagined tea, hot buffalo milk, deep-fried vegetables (*pakorās*), and three-cornered salty snacks (*samosās*) as male refreshments and Nescafé coffee, confectionery, and soft drinks as female delectations. In her work on street life in provincial Greece, Jane K. Cowan argues that sugary images evoke the domesticated woman, “delicious to men; yet good, safe, and unthreatening” (1991:201). It follows that “ingesting and enjoying sweets, a woman shows herself properly socialized as well as sociable” (Cowan 1991:201). Similar ideas seemed to permeate young men’s discourses in Meerut, where sweets and female leisure were often discussed together. Several Jat young men referred disparagingly to Meerut’s “ice-cream students”—a phrase that conjured images of wealthy female students and therefore simultaneously condensed young men’s suspicion of the urban rich, upper castes and young women.

Young male students’ masculine performances also reinforced gender inequalities in access to urban space. Young women felt that the public idleness of young men was threatening their education and ability to move about Meerut (cf. Lukose 2005). Young women at MC and CCSU frequently talked of young men intimidating them at urban addās. Between September 2000 and March 2005, local newspapers reported six incidents of young women being physically assaulted by male students.

At the same time, gender relations were shifting in Meerut. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, several coffee shops were established in the city, especially in new shopping malls or adjacent to large cinemas. These provided a comparatively private space in which young men and young women could establish relationships (see also Nisbett 2007). Coffee shops fudged the boundary between the masculine space of the tea stall and the feminine sweet shop and had what Cowan (1991), writing about similar developments in Greece, refers to as an “irritant effect” on entrenched gender norms: needling older urbanites anxious about the masculine threat presented by idle young men. These points help explain the 2005 arrests of young people in a Meerut park. Police enthusiasm for disciplining young couples was connected to public anxiety about the visibility of gender mixing. But such social interaction was still limited when I conducted field research in 2004 and 2005; a gender division remained apparent between relatively male tea stalls, street corners,

and bus stops and female sweet shops and confectionery stores.

So timepass was Janus-faced; on the one hand, it offered a means for young men across class and caste boundaries to express their sense of loss in the face of protracted exclusion from salaried work. On the other hand, timepass offered young men a feeling of social worth and cultural distinction. The timepass cultures I have described were nevertheless always “partial penetrations” (Willis 1977) of dominant culture; young men engaged in surprising acts of cultural invention at the same time that they reproduced pernicious ideas about class, gender, and urban space.

I have also suggested that class and caste contradictions of young-male timepass cultures created fault lines within *addā* cultures. It is important to note in this context that young men’s affirmative timepass cultures were limited spatially and temporally. Jat young men who hung out with their Muslim and Dalit “brothers” in the city did not visit Muslim and Dalit homes in rural areas. Nor did Jats who had engaged in cross-caste and cross-class cultures during their student days seem to keep up friendships with Dalits and Muslims after college. Young male solidarity built around unemployment flickered into life at certain moments but lacked a durable social form.

Conclusions

My analysis of unemployed young men in Meerut informs broader understandings of the temporal and spatial insecurities of young people marginalized by processes of neoliberal economic change. A sense of temporal disjuncture was highly developed among lower-middle-class young men studying in Meerut in 2004 and 2005, including members of the middle-ranking Jat caste and upwardly mobile Dalits and Muslims. Many of these students had spent their childhood and adolescence in educational environments that championed the productive use of time. Arriving at underfunded and poorly run colleges and universities, these young men found little to structure their daily lives.

A welter of studies have identified rising young male concern with time in the context of unemployment, both in India (Gooptu 2007; Heuzé 1996) and in other parts of the world (Mains 2007; Weiss 2009). Rather than simply being “added in” to broader accounts of young male anomie, my material highlights three points not well represented in broader anthropologies, sociologies, and human geographies of postcolonial youth. First, I have suggested that, by 2004–05, feelings of temporal anxiety had become so important in Meerut that time had become thematized in young men’s discourses: Discussion of timepass was especially common. Second, young male temporal insecurity did not take a single form, such as a concern over “surplus time” (Mains 2007) or a fear of “waiting” (Bayart 2007). Rather, young males’ temporal anxieties were expressed in a va-

riety of ways: through reference to overabundant unstructured time, being “left behind,” and being detached from one’s daily activity, for example. Third, I have pointed to the strongly overdetermined nature of a sense of temporal rupture. In Meerut, timepass reflected the concatenation of multiple spatiotemporal insecurities: the disappointment of being unable to acquire secure salaried work despite having spent a long time in formal education, the frustration of being unable to travel and start a family in the manner of a “successful man,” and the sense of loss that accompanies being removed from spaces associated with modernity and development. Bourdieu (1984) referred long ago to the “broken trajectory effect,” wherein young people fail to obtain the occupation they were led to expect. In western UP, it is more appropriate to refer to “broken trajectory effects,” in the plural, wherein dreams of occupational mobility, progression to adulthood, and movement into a modern era were disintegrating simultaneously.

I have also described how young men built a youth culture around the idea of “timepass”—a culture that they performed by mooching around tea stalls and street corners in Meerut. Timepass, far from being a passive activity, emerges as a means through which young men mark their social suffering and begin to negotiate unemployment. This argument resonates with research with apparently idle men in other contexts, for example, in Britain (Corrigan 1979), the United States (Whyte 1993), and the Mediterranean (Cowan 1991; Vale de Almeida 1996). I have stressed in particular the mischievousness of young men’s practices of hanging out and their frequent use of humor.

Much recent research in postcolonial settings suggests that educated unemployed young men engage either in democratic social action (e.g., Demerath 1999; Krishna 2002), for example, by acting as intermediaries between the rural poor and local state, or in reactionary class-based political activity, as when they become involved in aggressive forms of brokerage (e.g., Hansen 1996). The western UP example shows that unemployed young men may play both roles at once: Jats in Meerut combined their participation in lower-middle-class cultures of timepass with efforts to mark their distinction vis-à-vis low castes and Muslims (see also Jeffrey 2009). Moreover, timepass cultures were strongly gendered.

Such reflections highlight a need for a plural, flexible conceptual framework. The work of Mannheim (1972), Willis (1977), and Chakrabarty (1999) offers a guide to the collective youth solidarities that are emerging in liberalizing north India: Mannheim highlights the importance of generational solidarities; Willis draws attention to the creativity of youth cultures and their compromised nature; and Chakrabarty foregrounds some of the urban spaces in which young male performances take place. At the same time, my material follows Bourdieu (1977, 1984) in emphasizing the resilience of class inequalities and the manner in

which certain forms of inherited privilege bubble up even within relatively “egalitarian” cultures of male disappointment. Hence, the need for a culturally and organizationally sensitive political-economy approach to the study of post-colonial lower-middle classes, one attuned to both counterintuitive possibilities for cross-class mobilization and the often-intractable nature of social divides.

Notes

1. I have changed details of the stories of people described in this article to protect their anonymity.

2. For an example of how liberalization sometimes benefited lower-middle classes, see Sharad Chari’s (2004) study of entrepreneurship in south India.

3. Vijay Joshi states the situation succinctly in a discussion of one of India’s apparently vibrant new sectors: “The IT sector currently employs 1 million people; in five years, it may employ 3 million. But in five years India’s labour force will grow by around 65 million and much of the rise will occur in backward states” (in press:234).

4. Likewise, Nandini Gooptu (2007) has recently discussed unemployed youth disaffection in West Bengal, where many young men spoke of their uselessness and “wandering.” The cultural and political importance of unemployed young men haunted by a sense of temporal rupture is also well attested in travel writing (e.g., Mishra 2006) and Indian cinema (Mazumdar 2007). In a fascinating study, Ranjani Mazumdar (2007) has traced a move in Bollywood cinema 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* [Varma 2004]). The educated unemployed young man, wandering about, flirting, or simply “waiting for something to happen,” was a central motif in some of the popular comedies produced by Hrishikesh Mukherjee (see the film *Gol Māl* [1979]) and Sai Paranjape (e.g., *Chashme Buddoor* [1981]) in the 1970s and 1980s. In the 1990s and 2000s, the *tapori* became a staple of popular Indian cinema.

5. I am grateful to Amita Baviskar for directing my attention to these points.

6. Bourdieu has defended himself against accusations of class determinism; he argues that fields refract rather than reproduce dominant structures of power. He also claims that his conceptual work does not imply “that all small capital holders are necessarily revolutionaries and all big capital holders are automatically conservatives” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992:109). Yet the emphasis of Bourdieu’s work is on narrow class-based strategies.

7. R. L. Harriss (2003) argues that unemployed young men in Argentina from a range of social backgrounds came together in the early 2000s to demonstrate against neoliberal economic restructuring. Likewise, Charles Bundy (1987) emphasizes the extent to which unemployed youth from different sections of society challenged the South African apartheid regime. In a study of the changing lives of underemployed young men and young women in urban Madagascar, Cole (2004, 2005) has recently argued for the distinctive capacity of young people to problematize and to some extent transform dominant structures of power. Cole observes that, whereas many educated young men in a Madagascan city had been forced to enter poorly paid criminal activity, young women were often able to earn substantial amounts of money by engaging in transactional sex with foreign visitors to the country. In this context, young men (*jaombilos*) relied on their female partners for money and in return provided sex, companionship, and the image

of a youthful style—youth were effectively rethinking the gendered structures framing their lives precisely because of their marginalized position within society.

8. Madeleine Arnot makes a parallel argument:

Many of the themes of poststructuralist work on masculinities were originally represented in *Learning to Labour*—most notably the working through of social classifications and dualisms, the nature of meaning making and identity construction, the situated relational worlds of identity formation, and the complex cross-articulations of class, race, sexuality and gender. [2003:36]

9. The BSP was founded in 1984 by the Dalit Kanshi Ram and formed coalition governments in UP in 1993, 1995, 1997, and 2002. In April 2007, the BSP won a landslide victory in the state elections, capturing power on its own for the first time.

10. My research in CCSU and MC mainly consisted of participant-observation and interviews with student politicians and other students. I conducted the interviews in Hindi and Urdu, which I speak fluently, and did not use an interpreter or research assistant. The interviews were semistructured in the sense that I had a set of key topics that I wanted to discuss with students, mainly relating to political practice, opinions of higher education, and cultural practice. I wrote up my interviews within 24 hours and analyzed them using the ATLAS.ti data-analysis package and employing codes developed from my theoretical ideas and those emerging out of the field notes.

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