Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: Youth, Class, and the Politics of Waiting in India*

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REFERENCES


1 This book is the interesting product of fieldwork revisited with a fresh perspective. Less than ten years after his first doctoral study of Jat farmers’ economic practices and agricultural and business strategies in Uttar Pradesh (Jeffrey 1999), Craig Jeffrey returned to the same area to investigate how the families of this locally dominant caste, as well as members of other, less privileged groups had fared in light of the profound economic and agricultural transformations that have occurred in that part of India. The second time around, he concentrated on the young men of the following generation, who were studying in two university colleges in the provincial city of Meerut. Some of these youth had been the object of lavished parental attention and heavy educational investment. Those were times when other, traditionally disadvantaged castes were beginning to access new avenues for social and economic mobility, entering into a competition with heretofore well-to-do Jats. Education then appeared as a considerable asset towards strengthening and upping one’s position on the socio-economic ladder. It offered the prospects of leaving a by then iffy agricultural scene and securing more stable jobs in town. What happened almost a decade later is the focus of Jeffrey’s present study.

2 The book, comprised of six equal parts, includes an introduction, which situates the book’s main themes within recent studies on waiting, youth, unemployment and politics, together with a detailed presentation of the researcher’s fieldwork methodology; a chapter discussing the rise and resilience of a rural middle class mainly comprised of rich Jat farmers; and three other chapters depicting the activities involved in ‘waiting’ among
young male students, their engagement in collective student protest and the involvement of some of them in what the author calls ‘improvised politics’ as a makeshift career respectively. A conclusion wraps up the main findings and their impacts on a discussion of the notions of ‘middle classes’ and ‘field’ in the Indian context.

3 One must mention to the author’s credit his adept combination of an analysis of the strategies deployed by dominant Jats investing in local cultural capital and social networking to maintain and further their interests; and a description of the younger generations—whether belonging to the dominant castes or to other groups, including Dalits—for whom education has not yielded the expected returns. Interestingly, at a time when much anthropological work focuses on the globalised horizons that have allegedly come to dominate prospects of better futures, here, by contrast, Jeffrey highlights how the visions and strategies of members of a dominant caste are very much deployed locally. Aware of their locally-dependent dominant position, rich farmers still invested considerable amounts of time, energy, material gifts and efforts in maintaining and developing their clout and connections with influential people (politicians, government officers, higher-echelon bureaucrats, and so on) within local and regional spheres of power. Such awareness also generally obtained within the younger generations, who rarely sought education outside of Uttar Pradesh, and even of Meerut.

4 As regards the younger generations more specifically, Jeffrey’s findings are congruent with a general trend observed in other parts of the globe: education is no longer the panacea for social mobility it was once supposed to be, especially since the 1970s whether in ‘the West’ or in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Thus, in India as elsewhere masses of young men trained and groomed over several decades of schooling (primary, secondary and higher) have acquired an educational capital difficult to translate into a commodity on the job market. To be sure, this may owe in the present case to the mediocre quality of the provincial, largely dysfunctional colleges where they trained, with politics, mismanagement and corruption reigning supreme. Thus during the time the research was being conducted, students campaigned for the right to cheat in examinations. Their argument was based on the unfairness of punishing what was otherwise a widespread practice! A couple of years later, they raised a protest against a college registrar who had subcontracted the marking of exam sheets not only to undergraduate students—a fairly standard practice in the area—but even to schoolchildren! Yet beyond the specifics of this particular case, the Indian youth’s difficulty to translate their educational capital onto the job market is also linked to a structural question of demographics and economics. Massive investment in, and access to education on the part of new, formerly uneducated sections of the population has meant a higher demand from too many educated applicants for proportionately fewer qualified jobs available. There, too, political connections and economic assets in the form of substantial bribes have become decisive for accessing employment.

5 As for the overwhelming majority of this male youth, they increasingly found themselves in a limbo position of ‘waiting’, of making time pass (often using the Indian English coined expression of ‘timepass’) while their chances of ever securing a stable and decently-paid job diminished as years went by. In addition to a little studying, they engaged in a variety of activities ranging from informally meeting, gossiping and jesting at the tea stall, ‘eve-teasing’ (i.e. leering at young women and sexually harassing them), getting involved in university politics and mobilising other youth around higher education issues (as seen above), and so forth. To some, this provided a way of coping
with the sheer absurdity of a largely inadequate educational system, and, in the case of misdemeanour towards young female students, also an avenue for venting out their frustration at their inability to perform according to the still locally prevalent ideals of masculinity and family sustenance. To others, especially those enrolling for another degree in the hope of improving their employment prospects, political mobilisation was often a strategy for etching out a future—though modest as it might be—in the urban margins of the educated classes, in contrast to those of their peers who merely returned to their family farms.

6 In his analysis Jeffrey rightly takes issue with Partha Chatterjee’s distinction (2001) between civil and political society and convincingly demonstrates that civil and legal practices also characterise the politics of ordinary people in India. Thus, the author shows how the lower middle classes contribute to the constitution of politics at the grassroots level. Here, for instance, the students of the two Meerut colleges also engaged in debates about the ‘civilised’ nature of their political protest. Furthermore, cleverly taking his cue from Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of ‘fields’, a notion actually matching the empirical categories used by his Jat informants, Jeffrey highlights ‘the multiple ‘fields’ in which middle classes and poorer groups compete for social advantage’ (p. 19) while ‘playing the game’ of political and other connections.

7 With respect to the differential ways of ‘playing the game’ underlined by the author and the various related temporalities at work, a theory of time would have done justice to the apparent wealth of material accumulated (see the methodology section, pp. 23-36). Throughout the book is a linear assumption of time, which begs the question of possible differences in appraising time, depending on what one does with it. A description is offered of the youth’s many ways of doing ‘timepass’ (see above). How these respective ways may have intersected with a whole range of notions of time, whether locally specific or ‘globalised’, remains to be addressed. That the word ‘timepass’, commonly used in most of the situations documented, should be of Indian English coinage is only one part of the answer. One might reasonably surmise that, as in other contexts, in India or elsewhere, time has different kinds of essences: cyclical, linear, etc.; parallel temporalities might also be involved. Whether the aging students entertained any of these varied representations of time, and if so, in which context and doing what, is both an ethnographic and theoretical question. It also connects with that of the meanings of time as a concrete and physically manifested ‘thing’. Importantly, dreams of a better future were entertained whilst doing ‘timepass’, (timepass karna in Hindi). Time, here, was no abstract matter; even those dreams of a better future usually carried with them a concrete vision of what this future would entail, materially, affectively, and socially. Further reflection on these issues would contribute to an anthropological discussion of time articulating, and engaging with the work on hope that has come up in recent years.

8 These observations notwithstanding, this book fills an important gap on the politics of youth and class. Despite some repetition, one must give Jeffrey huge credit for his remarkably clear prose, even when explaining complicated economic processes and theories. This added strength is bound to make it a favourite among students of South Asia, politics, and education.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. See Silberschmidt (2001) for a general discussion of this point and the related images of progress and entry into white-collar work disseminated through education, the media and development institutions.

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Keywords: youth, politics, waiting, time, education

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