

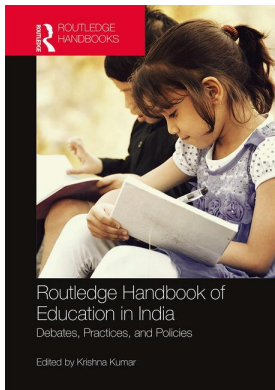
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.97.143

On: 27 Sep 2023

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Education in India Debates, Practices, and Policies

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Active partners

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315107929.ch17>

Craig Jeffrey, Jane Dyson

Published online on: 17 Oct 2017

How to cite :- Craig Jeffrey, Jane Dyson. 17 Oct 2017, *Active partners from:* Routledge Handbook of Education in India, Debates, Practices, and Policies Routledge

Accessed on: 27 Sep 2023

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315107929.ch17>

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Part V

Underbelly

This part addresses an area that lies outside the received knowledge and discourse of education in India. It exists, and not just in pockets or as an aberration, but rather as a major and vast venue of educational activity, but the activity itself is such that it resists acknowledgement. The three chapters included in this section hardly exhaust this vast area, nor do they provide an adequate mapping. Far from it, they merely provide an indication of the nature of the activities that characterise the underbelly of the legitimate system of education. The three activities covered by the chapters included in this part are: waiting, cheating, and coaching. These are not the kind of topics normally covered in reference books like this one. And technically, the geography they represent lies outside the borders of the system of education. It is important to view this geography for the same reasons that economists recognise the black market in order to study the market better. All three activities, namely waiting (for work), coaching (for success), and cheating (for ensuring success) form the ethos in which the system of education works. All three activities are widespread, though we lack sufficient information about how they are carried out in different parts of a vast country like India. Each of the three chapters included in this part concerns a specific region or state.

The first refers to unemployed youth. In their study of jobless youth of Western Uttar Pradesh, Craig Jeffrey and Jane Dyson came across a phenomenon they call the 'politics of waiting'. These authors see it as a global phenomenon of this period of history, but their chapter portrays it in the specific contours of Meerut, a town in the prosperous belt of an otherwise economically backward state. Unemployment among educated youth is as old as the modern system of education itself. It is often seen in relation to the impact that education has on the aspiration, attitude, and preferences of young people who have gone through the schooling process. Historically, it seems that the experience of going to school and college, and the certification of their success in examination, shape their views of acceptable employment. Education was once associated with salaried jobs of the kind that only the government could give. The unemployed youth whose lives and thoughts are analysed by Jeffrey and Dyson have received higher education. They carry the burden of their own and their parents' aspirations, in an era when the state has changed its character and no longer wishes to be perceived as an avenue of permanent salaried employment. How these young men endure long years of unemployment, and how they develop, through engagement and interaction, a critique of the political world that surrounds them is the focus of Jeffrey and Jane Dyson.

Aspiration and stress are also the main ingredients of the ethos in which 'Vyapam' became a synonym for scam in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. Vyapam is otherwise the Hindi acronym for the Professional Examination Board. Krishna Kumar's chapter examines a recent scam involving entrance tests for higher professional education in Madhya Pradesh. It argues that the intensely competitive circumstances form one aspect of professional education in areas like medicine and engineering; emergence of assisted cheating as a service industry forms the other aspect of contemporary higher education in a state that has demonstrated rather extraordinary warmth towards neoliberal policies in education. The chapter highlights the involvement of professionally educated youth in the scam that remained manageable for several years before it lost its hold on the secret operations necessary for its continuation. The chapter also attempts to address the question one might ask about this scam, whether this could have occurred anywhere in India. The cautiously negative answer offered in this chapter is based on the analysis of the specific historical and political conditions of Madhya Pradesh. The analysis draws our attention to the complexity of education as a field of study in a country whose regional diversity is not merely cultural. Political and administrative legacies and circumstances shape the systemic characteristics of education in remarkably specific ways.

This message is further corroborated by the last chapter in this section, which concerns private tuition and coaching from an early age as a pervasive social phenomenon in Bengal. Manabi Majumdar has studied this elusive subject in order to find out what impact it makes on the social goals of the educational policy. Parents invest in private tuition obviously because it improves their children's performance in examinations. As Disha Nawani's chapter explained, examinations have been at the heart of the culture of schooling in India since colonial times. Bengal is where this culture took root before it did so in other parts of India. It has resisted the various attempts made to reform it through new policies and the promotion of new practices. Many of these reform-oriented policies did not make much of a dent in Bengal; but that is hardly a sufficient explanation for the scale and social fervour associated with home tuition. Indeed, private tuition is recognised as a major aspect of child-rearing in many other Asian countries, particularly in the East Asian region. How it intersects with political commitment with social justice and equity through modern governance that Bengal is believed to practice is what Manabi Majumdar attempts to explain.

Active partners

Rethinking the educated unemployed in India

Craig Jeffrey and Jane Dyson

In January 2005, at Meerut College, about 40 miles north-east of Delhi, I met Lekhpal Singh. Singh had more the appearance of a professor than a student – his hair was flecked with grey and laugh lines spread out from the corners of his eyes. He had been living at the college for 13 years, during which time he had acquired a BA, a BEd, three MAs, and a PhD. He had applied unsuccessfully for many government jobs, but was still *'berozgaar'* (unemployed). 'There's been nothing suspect about my achievement', Lekhpal said. 'My results have all been first class. But the college is very poor. And unemployment is everywhere. Recently 12,000 people applied for three government jobs'.

So what do you do all day? I asked.

'We do nothing. Just kill time.'

There are millions of Lekhpals across the world. The World Bank (2011) reported that 202 million people were unemployed around the world, of which over one-third are youth aged 15–24. The rate of unemployment is particularly high in North Africa and the Middle East, but is also very significant in Southern Europe, sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia. While the economic fortunes of many countries in these regions have recovered to some extent since the global recession of 2008–11, the recovery has not resulted in the creation of high-skilled jobs for graduates. Even before the recession, rapid economic growth in the 1990s and 2000s did not see the creation of a large number of well-paid formal-sector jobs in China and India (see Kaplinsky 2005). For example, the IT sector employed six million people in 2009 in India, a country with a working-age population of 500 million (Joshi 2009). At the same time, national governments have been under pressure to reduce the overall size of state bureaucracies.¹

A meagre supply of graduate jobs has coincided with a huge increase globally in demand for high-skilled, well-paid formal-sector employment. Rapid population growth rates, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and parts of South Asia, are increasing demand for work, and this 'youth bulge' is increasingly likely to be educated. Enrolment in tertiary education has increased markedly, from roughly 17 per cent of the global youth population in university in 1991 to 29 per cent in 2011. Paul Willis (1977) famously argued that schools in the UK persuaded students to align their ambitions with available jobs – working class children learned to aspire to working-class jobs, and scholars in the USA have argued that junior colleges perform the same 'cooling out function' among youth from marginalised backgrounds (young people

enter with high ambitions and then scale back). But the majority of colleges and universities in the global South do not work in this manner. Education encourages young people to plot futures in well-paid, non-manual, permanent employment, and media images of middle-class success feed into this revolution of rising aspirations. At the same time, employers find that schools and universities are not providing young people with the skills and knowledge required for the job market. It follows that the apparent advantage to a developing country of having a large, educated youth population – the so-called ‘demographic dividend’ – can become instead a restive and demoralised ‘demographic disaster’ (World Bank 2011).

Young people often respond to unemployment by refusing to enter jobs, such as manual labour or unskilled service work, that they regard as beneath their status – at least in the short term. But not all young people can afford to remain jobless very long, and even youth from relatively wealthy backgrounds often find it difficult to remain ‘unemployed’ in the face of parental and other pressures. The most important indicator of graduate distress is therefore not outright unemployment but ‘underemployment’: ‘part-time or insecure work that does not reflect young people’s skills and ambitions’ (Prause and Dooley 1997). In 2010, 536 million young people were underemployed according to figures released by the World Bank (2011). The state does not regulate the terms of this employment, there are few opportunities for collective bargaining, and such jobs typically offer training or opportunities for self-development (World Bank 2011). The prevalence of male breadwinner norms means that in many regions young men often experience the problem of graduate un/underemployment most acutely, and shifts in the labour market have sometimes placed a premium on skills coded as ‘feminine’. But women also face un/underemployment in many regions, and may face a ‘double subordination’ as they grapple both with the poor economic environment and entrenched gender norms.

Unemployment and underemployment have social and cultural, as well as economic, consequences. Young people are often unable to acquire the adult status and savings that are pre-requisites for marriage (Masquelier 2005), they often cannot afford to buy or rent independent living space (Hansen 2005), and in many areas of the world they face difficulties in negotiating with state officials, especially the police (Rogers 2008). A sense of gendered crisis may become apparent, for example, where men feel that they are unable to fulfil locally salient visions of masculinity. More generally, scholars have written of widespread feelings of hopelessness, negative introspection, and even self-harm, including suicide, among graduate youth (Mains 2007). In many cases young people feel alienated from their peers, family, and wider society (Jeffrey 2010).

A number of commentators have argued that alienated youth become involved in forms of action that are violent, reproduce dominant power, and occur within patron–client networks. The World Bank *Development Report* (2011) identified educated unemployed youth as one of the chief causes of political turmoil around the world. Educated un/underemployed youth are commonly imagined in the media as the dry tinder for the flame of fascist or other extremist forms of politics. At a more everyday level, scholars have referred to educated un/underemployed young people, sometimes especially graduates, as engaged in violent forms of consumption, including compulsive behaviour (Mains 2007). These studies often rest on older ideas of youth as a period of ‘storm and stress’ (Hall 1904) or ‘protest-prone population’ (Keniston 1971). Marx and Engels (1978) famously argued that educated un/underemployed are capable only of idiosyncratic forms of politics and social action; they called these youth ‘alchemists of the revolution’, with deliberate irony.

Ethnographic studies provide some support for these depictions of educated un/underemployed youth. Heuzé (1996) and Hansen (1996), in two different studies of youth and religious communal violence in India, point to the connections between unemployment and

violent action. Cincotta (2003) links rising educated un/underemployment among young people to cross-border terrorism. Moreover, even the everyday level reports show that a rise in the number of educated un/underemployed youth may increase gender violence. In all these studies – which tend to focus on men rather than women – educated un/underemployed young people’s actions appear to sustain practices of class and gender dominance and bolster existing patron–client networks. But from another perspective, we might imagine youth as well positioned to promote constructive political and social change within countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Mannheim (1972 [1936]) argues that within any region, generations experience the same conditions at the same times during their lives and thus come to constitute social units. In particular moments, this generation ‘in itself’ can become a generation ‘for itself’, and Mannheim places particular emphasis on the potential transformative power of the youth.

This chapter addresses the issue of unemployed young people’s action by examining the lives of educated unemployed youth in north India, drawing on 20 years of research mainly in western Uttar Pradesh and the neighbouring state of Uttarakhand (see also Dyson 2014; Jeffrey 2010; Jeffrey *et al.* 2008). It is written as a set of personal reflections, tracking the problem of educated unemployment through three key social projects that I have conducted in India since 1995.

In the first section of the chapter, we situate the problem of educated unemployment with reference to Craig Jeffrey’s research on the rise of a rural middle class in rural western Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s. The second part examines the problem of educated unemployment among young people in Meerut in the mid-2000s. The final section of the chapter, which focuses especially on the politics of jobless youth, considers the issue from the perspective of a community living in a mountainous and remote region of Uttarakhand. Our overall argument is that educated unemployed youth can be ‘active partners’ in efforts to address the employment crisis.

A rural middle class: the origins of social congestion

Between 1995 and 1999, Craig Jeffrey carried out 13 months of ethnographic research on the investment strategies of rich Jat farmers in Meerut district, western Uttar Pradesh. Meerut district is known as a centre of wheat, sugarcane, and potato farming. The introduction of tubewell irrigation and new improved varieties of cane and wheat between the 1960s and 1980s had transformed the fortunes of the region’s farmers. The Jats were only roughly midway up the ladder in terms of their caste status, but as landowners and people who had good access to the state administration, many Jats owning over 12 acres of land had become prosperous – a nascent rural middle class (see also Jeffrey *et al.* 2008).

Jeffrey’s fieldwork examined how rich Jats had used the profits they acquired from farming. Were they investing in local business such that their wealth was trickling down to the poor? Or were rich Jats investing their money in ways that reproduce inequalities between them and the relatively poor lower caste, the ex-Untouchables also called Dalits? These questions were particularly important in the mid-1990s in the context of the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), led by a Dalit woman and former school teacher Mayawati, which sought to improve the position of Dalits relative to Jats.

There was no typical Jat rich farmer. But the case of Kishanpal is instructive. In 1996, Kishanpal was in his early fifties and had a son and a daughter. As I arrived at the family’s large metal gate for the first time in May 1996, I remember Kishanpal springing from his chair, banishing a German shepherd dog to the corner of the compound and ushering me inside ‘*Aaiye, aaiye*’, ‘Come, come’, he said, as if he had been expecting a foreign researcher to arrive any moment.

Within five minutes he had changed into a smart pyjama suit and his wife, Leela, had bought tea.

Kishanpal spoke in rich tones of the problems connected to farming in western Uttar Pradesh – land degradation, the difficulty of finding labourers, and the diminishing profits from his crops of cane and wheat. He spoke angrily about how the Dalits were being ‘pampered’ by the new BSP government. He said that he was adopting a two-pronged strategy for the future of his family. The first was protecting his land and farm by strengthening his family’s connections with politicians and government officials. He said: ‘To get on here as a farmer you need to cultivate people as well as cultivate land. You need a network of help.’ ‘The Jats have a saying’, he continued, ‘A fist is stronger than five fingers’ (Jeffrey 2001, 2002).

The second prong was to strike out into urban areas and try to get his son a position in government service. He had invested an enormous amount of money making sure his children went to an impressive private school on the edge of Meerut. Kishanpal was also saving money for a bribe to get his son a job as a police inspector. He planned to get his daughter married into a Meerut police family – that would strengthen his links inside the police and help his son get a job. I asked what would happen if his daughter did not like her proposed partner. Kishanpal replied, ‘She will adjust.’

After a few months, I could trace the fine lines of cooperation that linked rich Jat farmers to the police, land revenue officers, judges, school principals, district development officials, agricultural marketing offices, and other local bigwigs. Rich Jats went to government offices to flatter bureaucrats and they organised ‘chicken and whiskey parties’ for their influential friends. Corruption involving the police was especially common, and a few Jat farmers even hired police officers as paid mercenaries. The police would carry out hits using homemade pistols. They could not use their official weapons because every bullet has to be accounted for. The pistols were crude weapons made out of the taps found in train washrooms. It cost Rs. 100,000 to arrange a killing through the police in 1999. This was equivalent to what farmers could make in a year from six acres of sugarcane.

As I learned more about these networks it became clear that rich farmers had been able to reproduce their agricultural dominance in the sphere of competition for state resources, and had done so through a set of strategies that had profoundly negative effects on poorer members of their caste, Jat women, and Dalits. Also, by investing in local state networks, rich farmers had effectively been able to defend their historical privileges against the threat posed by the political party, the BSP.

Just how effective Jats had been at reproducing their power became obvious when I spoke to the Dalits, who felt angry and depressed. They complained constantly of having to work on starvation wages, of police and Jat brutality, of their daughters and wives facing molestation in the fields. If the Dalits threatened to revolt, the Jats wouldn’t let them collect cattle fodder from the fields or defecate on their land. When I asked the Dalits whether there was any hope of seeking redress from the state, they were downbeat. ‘We still live in a feudal system’, they said. ‘No one listens to the poor.’ I asked if the government could help, and the typical reaction was to quote a local saying, ‘Even the dogs don’t approach the empty-handed.’

Timepass

The direction of my research was to change radically, however, in 2004, when I began to receive plaintive letters from the sons of rich Jat farmers. It seemed that rich Jat farmers’ strategy of attempting to place their sons in off-farm employment, especially government jobs, was mis-firing. Many young men were writing about being ‘*berozgaar*’ (unemployed). The economic

reforms of the 1990s had not created many new private positions. At the same time, under the reforms the state was not able to create a large number of new government jobs. A type of social congestion had emerged. A huge burgeoning rural middle class, including by this stage upwardly-mobile Dalits, were competing for a tiny pool of jobs. Many rich Jat farmers had seen their sons come back from university disconsolate. 'We couldn't get jobs', they said, 'But we don't want to work on the farm. It would be too shameful.' These young men felt marooned. They were stuck between the rural and urban, between youth and adulthood, and between what they understood to be 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

In 2004–05, I carried out a new research project on the political actions of educated unemployed youth in Meerut and the associated issue of student politics. I spent much of my research in a tea stall outside the gate of the town's oldest, but now run down, Meerut College. There, next to a vast cauldron of boiling fat, I would meet with students to discuss their ambitions, ideas, and experiences. For eight months this research continued, by the end of which I had interviewed over 200 students and participated in numerous political rallies, hostel parties, and trips to meet government bureaucrats.

Versions of the following conversation run through my field notes.

CJ: Hey, how's it going? What are you doing?

STUDENT: Nothing.

CJ: Really, nothing?

STUDENT: Yes.

CJ: It looks like something or other.

STUDENT: Yes, yes, it's something or other.

CJ: So what is that something or other?

STUDENT: It's nothing. Timepass.

Timepass was everywhere in Meerut in the 2000s. Oxford Dictionaries Online defines timepass as 'The action or fact of passing the time, typically in an aimless or unproductive way.' In contemporary India people commonly use the word 'timepass' to refer to a period of down time between bouts of work, and it is variously rendered as 'timepass', 'time pass', 'time-pass', and 'TP'.

While timepass could theoretically refer to any activity that passes the time, it usually denotes relatively meaningless, light, trivial activity, and it is counter-posed with 'serious' action in India. Timepass involves distraction, faint amusement, and it is productive only in so far as it staves off boredom, prevents negative introspection, and allows the body, mind, and soul some respite from ordinary life.

Historians of nineteenth-century Europe have traced the rise of boredom to the spread of ideas of clock time and growth of industrial labour (Thompson 1967; Zerubavel 1985). In India, too, linear notions of clock time – physically represented in the spread of calendars and timepieces – came to compete during the late colonial period with older, cyclical experiences of time. The colonial government simultaneously introduced new forms of time-consciousness, for example through the construction of railways. 'Time' itself became an object of social comment, and multiple spaces emerged in which this time needed to be 'passed', from traffic jams to railway waiting rooms, clinics to post office queues. In India, a small industry has emerged around catering for people's boredom, including magazines, cheap fiction, snack vendors, street performers, and more recently mobile phone apps. 'Timepass, timepass, timepass' is a common mantra for those hawking peanuts on train platforms, just as it was the name selected in 2002 by Britannia Industries for a new line of salty snacks. So ubiquitous has the term

'Timepass' become in modern India that it was chosen as the title of a Bollywood film in 2005.

Passing time and humour are closely linked, as Samuel Beckett recognised in his classic play *Waiting for Godot*. 'That passed the time', announces Vladimir at one point in the play. 'It would have passed anyway', Estragon replies. As timepass has proliferated in popular culture in India it has also become the subject of jokes. In many colleges across India, youth make reference to their 'serious' and 'timepass' boyfriends and girlfriends. Their serious partners are marriage candidates. The timepass ones are simply being entertained for the time being. Parents often use timepass semi-humorously, 'What do you mean that you are just doing timepass?' They ask their children angrily. 'Watermelons do timepass in the fields!'

For unemployed young people in many parts of India, 'timepass' signals dissatisfaction with poor schooling, unemployment, blocked mobility, and financial stress. Unemployed young men have a triply problematic relationship to time: they are not able to accord with general notions of what it is to be developed; they are unable to effect a life transition from youth to adulthood; and they also feel that they exist somehow outside the normal run of clock time. Hanging out at street corners or spending long periods simply 'doing nothing' becomes a means of advertising this sense of social and temporal anomie. Timepass serves three functions simultaneously. First, it suggests detachment from one's situation. I'm not really interested in my studies, many young people said, I'm just doing timepass. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984: 235) famously wrote that the refusal to work is often the tactic of the unemployed youth and he called this strategy 'the one man strike'. Second, timepass suggests an overabundance of time that needs to be killed. Third, it suggests a sense of being left behind relative to the small number of those who do 'make it'.

Timepass is also productive, however (see Jeffrey 2010). The social act of timepass, for example standing about at bus stops or playing cards in tea stalls, provides opportunities to hear news, exchange ideas, and establish friendships. People who would otherwise regard each other with disdain may, through the shared experience of waiting to realise their aspirations, come to strike up friendships and develop shared goals.

While doing timepass, young men from Jat, Dalit, and Muslim backgrounds shared cigarettes, bought each other chai, and stood around on bus stops with their arms draped around each other's shoulders. They got into mock battles, played badminton, and exchanged news. Such cross-caste fraternising would not have happened at that time in rural areas. These cultures were powerfully gender specific, however. Young women felt doubly excluded – from good employment (like the men) and from the ability to participate in urban timepass.

Timepass was also leading to some positive forms of politics. There were certain moments in which the plight of the underemployed, poorly educated youth came strikingly to light, and in these situations people passing time at street corners or in hostels came out onto the streets. For example, in October 2004 it emerged that the Registrar of Meerut University was lining his pockets by sending master's degree examinations to be marked by school children. This happened fairly frequently in Uttar Pradesh at that time. But in this case the official had been sending the exams to be marked by children as young as 12 years old. Students took to the streets to burn their degrees.

Much more generally, young people across lines of class, caste, religion, and gender campaigned against corruption in the university administration, lobbied for students to obtain scholarships, and worked to address problems of police harassment. They tried to increase public understanding of the struggles of unemployed youth, worked to improve standards of tuition in the city, and even went back to rural areas to advise younger youth. There was a type of positive feedback at work here: educated underemployed youth were concerned that the generation coming after them would not have to suffer the same indignities.

Some of the student demonstrations took bizarre forms. On one occasion early in 2005, students protested about their right to cheat in examinations. Students argued that the educational system is cheating them by leading them to expect good jobs. Why shouldn't they also cheat? They also argued that influential students are already able to cheat. Students argued that mass copying in exams is a democratic form of cheating.

Student politics aimed at countering corruption was difficult to sustain, in part because a section of the student population, mostly the sons of rich Jat farmers, had developed lucrative careers as student brokers. I spent a lot of time with these brokers, who found niches in which to operate between the state and local society.

Umesh Singh was typical. A well-built, tall young man who came from a rich farming family close to Meerut, Umesh began by developing a reputation as an anti-corruption crusader. This helped him build a support base among students, who voted for him in the student union election. After winning a student union post, he got involved in corruption himself. He helped businessmen get the affiliation certificates for their new colleges from the university. He worked as a middleman between building contractors and the university administration, and even influenced appointments in university posts.

These students weren't just copying their seniors. Student brokers were adamant they were a cut above their fathers. Umesh said, 'We actually have to go back to the villages to advise our fathers. We tell them, "You've been giving that policeman mangoes for 10 years to keep him sweet. But you should make the relationship work for you. You should demand a share of the income he makes from taking bribes." We teach our fathers how to be brokers.' This is a telling comment on how a particularly pernicious type of hyper-entrepreneurial culture has taken hold in some parts of provincial India.

It was also evident that many educated unemployed young men with some degree of social support and financial backing entered the educational business. They set up coaching institutes, tutorial centres, or became board members in private colleges. One set of young men I came to know well responded to the experience of applying unsuccessfully for army officer positions by setting up a tutorial institute that specialised in preparing young people for the army officer examinations and interview. The vast penumbra of institutions and individual forms of tuition that comprise the unofficial educational sector in areas of western Uttar Pradesh is poorly understood (although see other contributions to this volume). Yet one point was very clear in my Meerut research: A section of the youth population were responding to demoralising employment outcomes by reproducing the system that produced them as underemployed youth.

Many of these brokers and educational 'fixers' also continued to protest against corruption. The morning might see Umesh staging a roadblock to protest about the corrupt university administration. The afternoon might then see him in the vice-chancellor's office doing secret deals behind students' backs. Umesh justified this by making a distinction between corruption and fraud. He said that corruption is when you pay a bribe and get something done. He said that this is how the world works. He said that fraud is when you pay a bribe and something still doesn't happen.

I once saw Umesh at the hustings for the student election. He was standing in front of his audience asking them 'You name one instance when I've been corrupt.' When the audience started providing examples, Umesh just stared back at them, smiling. I asked Umesh later, 'How did you have the nerve to do that?' 'Craig', he said, 'I'm total politics.'

In 2009, I became interested in broadening my focus to understand how unemployed youth are responding to joblessness in different parts of the world. This interest led to a new project on the social strategies of educated unemployed youth in the Indian Himalayas. Jane Dyson and I based ourselves in the village of Bemni, located at 12,000 feet in the remote Nandakini valley

in Chamoli district in Uttarakhand. Jane has spent 15 months interviewing children about their working lives and social relationships in Bemni as part of her doctoral research in 2003 and 2004 (see Dyson 2014). Between 2012 and 2014, Jane and I carried out a total of 12 months of follow-up field research in Bemni on the social and political practices of educated unemployed youth, often working with young people whom Jane interviewed as children in the early 2000s.

The General Caste (GC) population in Bemni was roughly 69 per cent and Scheduled Castes (SC) constituted the remaining 31 per cent. GCs tended to be somewhat wealthier than SCs, who also suffered some discrimination in the village. But caste and class inequalities were less marked in Bemni than in Meerut. GCs lacked the assets and income of their counterparts on the plains, and even the richest GCs in the village in 2012 had modest landholdings and few consumer goods.

Unemployment is as pressing a problem in this remote rural location as it is in western Uttar Pradesh. Chamoli district lacks manufacturing industry. Since the mid-2000s, in particular, the Uttarakhand government has been under pressure to reduce the number of people in government employment in the state. Moreover, those government jobs that exist are concentrated in the major cities in the southern (plains area) of the state.

Our research pointed to a widespread demoralisation among young people in Bemni in 2012–14 that echoed the despondency of youth whom I had interviewed in Meerut in 2004–05. Youth in Bemni did not speak of themselves as engaged in ‘timepass’, reflecting the fact that this word is most common in urban areas. But they did frequently refer to themselves as ‘*khaali*’, a word that means ‘free’ but also ‘empty’. In addition, educated young people who had tried unsuccessfully to obtain government or private jobs frequently practised forms of self-denigration. For example, when we asked about their employment, they would say that they are ‘just breaking stones’ (*pathhar thoma*).

Our research showed that young people are not passive in the face of this difficulty. Unemployed youth – men and women – are crucial social actors in contemporary rural Uttarakhand. My Meerut research pointed to positive youth politics, but it tended to be based largely around the life of the university. In Uttarakhand, young men and women were active in a broad range of social and political projects, campaigning for improvements to local schools, helping to bring electricity to the village, campaigning for the construction of a telecommunications tower, giving school tutorials free of charge, motivating other youth, starting new business enterprises, and resolving thorny political disputes.

Young people were also developing a new philosophy of politics. Youth said that politics should not be imagined as competition for a share of the pie, but rather as about making the pie. Politics is not about the distribution of resources, in other words, but actually about what you can do collaboratively and through painstaking negotiation to create resources. It is a vision of generative politics. Young people’s new imagination of politics also had a strong temporal element. They said that people should not be waiting for the government to help them. They should instead be trying to embody better practices in their own conduct.

We should not underestimate the challenges of linking up these small-scale forms of community activism to broader state and international development efforts. Many young people argued that their generative politics will only be effective if it remains wholly outside the ambit of the state and NGOs. Moreover, many young people regarded the whole political establishment as ‘rotten to the core’.

There are resonances between these conclusions and work on youth movements of the 2010s, such as the Occupy Movement in the USA (Manilov 2013). Young people in north India, working on an everyday level to improve the lives of their communities, were in the

process trying to 'be the change they wanted to see in the world': be polite, be fair, and in the process slowly transform their communities. Technology played a prominent role in this type of politics. Increased mobile phone ownership allowed young people to take photos of examples of corruption and send these to local officials. They also put their phones on speaker mode when talking to officials so that their friends knew they were not conducting deals in secret.

In sum, a social revolution is afoot in provincial India. Young people have been drawn into education in unprecedented numbers. They have come to accept and believe in the norms of liberal democracy and citizenship. And they have new forms of power and knowledge, in the form of an understanding of modernity and technology. Parents acknowledge this, and look to youth as change agents. Youth in their late teens and twenties are often those who understand the needs of children most carefully and have children's interests at heart. But youth themselves in places such as Bemni and Meerut say that their actions are often poorly institutionalised and understood. There is also a critical lack of basic social research on young people in South Asia and Asia more broadly.

Conclusions

We have shown that an intended consequence of the mobility strategies of both a rural middle class and upwardly mobile sections of the rural population in Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand in the 1990s/2000s has been the creation of a large and socially heterogeneous educated under-employed youth population. This process is likely to continue into the future, with over 100 million young people set to join the labour market over the next decade (2015–2025).

Negative depictions of educated unemployed youth proliferate both in the media, government reports, and scholarly work (e.g. Cincotta 2003). Our anthropological research in two provincial parts of north India suggest that a portion of the educated unemployed youth population in north Indian is indeed involved in nefarious forms of politicking. The figure of the youth 'broker' is prominent in everyday life in places as diverse as Meerut and Bemni.

Yet we also found many young people who were acting as community activists. These youth were not simply imitating the politics of the previous generation. Building on their education and new technological opportunities, they were developing novel means of engaging with each other and the state. Moreover, as people relatively familiar with educational and employment markets, they were often better positioned to advise younger youth than were older adults in their forties, fifties, and sixties. In Mannheim's (1972 [1936]) terms, educated unemployed youth in their late teens and twenties constituted an 'active generation'.

A key policy implication is that educated unemployed youth are part of the solution to the problem of widespread joblessness. That youth often have the interests of younger children at heart makes them willing and effective potential partners for organisations, including the state, seeking to address the issue of educated unemployment. A key challenge in this area, however, will be countering young people's deep mistrust of government and NGOs in many parts of provincial India. Another key challenge will be harnessing young people's energies in such a way as to encourage educational reform in a context where many underemployed young people, understandably, see opportunities to cash in on their experience by running low-quality tutorials or educational institutions of different types.

Note

1 In 2000, the World Bank made an annual 2 per cent cut of the state bureaucracy a condition of its continuing aid to Uttar Pradesh (Jeffrey *et al.* 2008).

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