1   India Waiting

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

How common is it for young men in Meerut to imagine themselves as "just waiting"? Why and how do young men like Jaipal engage in such contradictory forms of politics? And what might answers to these questions tell us about class, politics and "waiting"? This book addresses these questions with reference to field research conducted in the North-Western part of Uttar Pradesh (UP) State. I focus on educated unemployed young men and rich farmers from a threatened middle class in order to engage with three main areas of scholarly inquiry. First, I contribute to emerging debates on post-colonial middle classes. Second, I examine the micro-politics of class and

caste dominance in UP. Third, I reflect on how different forms of "waiting" are implicated in processes of social change.

I consider issues of class, politics and waiting through telling the story of a lower middle class of Jats in Meerut district, especially students from this caste studying in Meerut. A prosperous, socially confident and politically influential set of rich Jat farmers emerged in North-Western UP in the first four decades after Indian Independence, partly as a result of improvements in agricultural production. During the 1990s they faced new threats to their power associated with the rise of lower castes. They addressed these threats by trying to influence the operations of local government and by investing in their children's education—strategies which farmers imagined as forms of "waiting" (see Chapter Two of this book). Yet only a few of the sons of these rich farmers were able to obtain the salaried jobs that they had been led to expect and many had come to imagine themselves as people who had no option but to wait. I examine cultures of limbo among educated unemployed young men. Unemployed young men were advertising their aimlessness through a self-conscious strategy of hanging out—a masculine youth culture that challenged the dominant temporal logics of their parents and the state (Chapter Three). This culture of masculine waiting was precipitating collective youth protest in Meerut, especially around issues of corruption, students' progression through academic institutions, educational mismanagement and government officials' harassment of students. In Meerut young men from a wide variety of social backgrounds sometimes came together to orchestrate agitations against the state and university (Chapter Four). Yet class and caste inequalities fractured collective protest around unemployment and corruption. In particular, among unemployed students a set of Jat "leaders," who also called themselves "fixers" (*kām karānewale*), used their social contacts to monopolize local networks of "corruption"—practices that undermined young people's collective action (Chapter Five). Through documenting these different forms of youth cultural and political action, alongside an analysis of the strategies of rich farmers in rural areas, the book highlights the micro-politics of class power in north India and the importance of waiting as a basis for mobilization.

This chapter locates my study with reference to broader literatures on time, middle-class unemployed youth and everyday politics in India. In the next

section, I introduce recent literature on waiting and the Indian middle classes. I then focus on the experiences of educated unemployed young men within the lower middle classes, especially their temporal anxieties and political responses to waiting. This is followed by a consideration of how the politics of lower middle-class young men in India might be theorized. Finally, I outline my research strategy and the structure and argument of the book.

Waiting and Middle India

We all wait. Waiting has always been a characteristic feature of human life. Waiting for rain, harvests, birth and death are important components of the social organization of non-industrialized societies. Waiting is also a key dimension of modernity; during the twentieth century the increasing regimentation and bureaucratization of time in the West created multiple settings—such as traffic jams, offices and clinics—in which people waited (see Corbridge 2004; Moran 2004; Bissell 2007). But what of long-term waiting? What of situations in which people have been compelled to wait for years, generations or whole lifetimes, not as the result of their voluntary movement through modern spaces but because they are durably unable to realize their goals?

There is a growing literature based in different parts of the world on forms of "waiting" wherein people have been incited by powerful institutions to believe in particular visions of the future yet lack the means to realize their aspirations. Of course, there is nothing new about such chronic, fruitless waiting, which characterized the experiences of colonized populations (Chakrabarty 2000) and the lives of Europe's large *population flottante* in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Darnton 1999), for example. From a rather different perspective, Siegfried Kracauer (1995 [1963]) argued that many professionals in urban Germany in the 1920s had a profound sense of "just waiting." Kracauer described upper middle classes *horror vacui* (fear of empty time and space) in the context of a decline in religious faith.

Yet in a recent book, Jean-Francois Bayart (2007) has argued that long-term experiences of "waiting" became a more prominent feature of the experiences of populations, especially subaltern people, across the world after the 1960s (see also Bourdieu 2000). Bayart cites as evidence: an increase in

the numbers of international migrants occupying detention centers on the edge of industrial states; the rising prison population in the US and parts of Europe; and people forced to move between countries in the global south in the aftermath of war or economic collapse. Bayart also suggests that there are whole nations, such as Zimbabwe in 2008, effectively waiting for a future and great swathes of the world's population, for example in Sub-Saharan Africa and north India, who have written into their minds certain hopes but for whom social goods are elusive and, who, as a result, define themselves as people in wait (see Ferguson 2006). Much recent scholarship supports the tenor of Bayart's argument. Ethnographic research on asylum seekers (Conlon 2007), refugees (Wong 1991; Stepputat 1992), urban slum dwellers (Appadurai 2002), the unemployed (Mains 2007) and rural poor (Corbridge et al. 2005), for example, is full of references to people waiting and their associated feelings of boredom and lost time. Moreover, these waiting populations are often subjected to discourses that stigmatize people as "surplus to requirements" or "loitering" (Mbembe 2004).

During my fieldwork I met large numbers of unemployed young men in north India who were engaged in forms of waiting characterized by aimlessness and ennui. Unemployed young men in Meerut commonly spoke of being lost in time and they imagined many of their activities as simply ways to pass the time ("timepass," as it is often described in India). This waiting was not wholly purposeless, however: it offered opportunities to acquire skills, fashion new cultural styles and mobilize politically.

I also discuss another form of "waiting" in this book. Several scholars have referred to how situations of rapid change in the contemporary world may persuade people to readjust their temporal horizons. In particular, they may come to prioritize long-term over short-term goals: they choose to wait. For example, the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (2002) has described how activist organizations in Mumbai improved the living conditions of the urban poor by deliberately adopting a "long-term political horizon." These organizations encouraged their members to disregard the near-term development targets of foreign NGOs in favor of pursuing longer range goals. Such deliberate forms of investment have also been discussed in studies of household decision-making. In many situations, and perhaps especially during periods of rapid

socio-economic change, people forego a desire for immediate consumption in favor of investing in the future of their families (Berry 1985). In the north Indian case I examine in this book, rich farmers made an explicit decision in the mid-1990s to prioritize their children's education and they imagined this strategy as a form of "investment" that entailed "waiting."

In elaborating on these two different forms of waiting—relatively purposeless youth timepass and more strategic investment on the part of rich farmers—my aim is not to construct a meta-narrative about the significance of waiting in India or across the world. I adopt instead an ethnographic approach that discusses the nature and social implications of waiting from the perspective of a struggling lower middle class, especially educated unemployed young men.

Middle classes of different types are highly visible social and political actors in many parts of the postcolonial world. Middle classes in Latin America, Africa and Asia 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, economic restructuring and projects of international development to separate themselves from the poor (e.g. Berry 1985; Mawdsley 2004; Robison and Goodman 1996; Fernandes 2006). What tends to unite these disparate classes is a shared anxiety about the possibility of downward mobility and a determination to use their economic and social resources to shore up their position vis-à-vis the poor (e.g. Barr-Melej 2001; Cohen 2004).

India offers an example of how middle classes in postcolonial contexts are reshaping social and political life. The much vaunted emergence of Information Technology (IT) allied to the rapid economic growth rate in India since the early 1990s are often said to have raised increasing numbers of Indians into the middle class. There is considerable debate over the size of the Indian middle class; estimates vary from 50 million to 350 million (see Deshpande 2003; Nijman 2006), in large part because of disagreement over what combination of factors—lifestyle, income levels, consumption patterns and employment status, for example—should be used to delineate classes. For example, Deshpande (2003: 138) reports that if ownership of consumer goods is a

key criterion for defining the Indian middle class, this segment of society was small in the mid-1990s: less than 8 percent of Indian households possessed a color television in 1995–96. If we examine the middle class as a social category actually used by people on the ground it may be even smaller than Deshpande suggests; Sheth (1999) argues that people tend to define themselves as "middle class" in India only when they possess a suite of consumer goods, education, a brick-built house and white-collar occupation. There is nevertheless a consensus that a reasonably substantial, moderately prosperous stratum now exists in India that does not herald from traditional elites but which exerts a profound influence over the politics, culture and social organization of the country (Fernandes 2006; Fernandes and Heller 2006; Varma 2006; see Milanovic 2005 for a dissenting view).

Fernandes and Heller (2006) identify three tiers within the Indian middle classes: first, senior professionals, higher bureaucrats and others with advanced professional credentials; second, a petit bourgeoisie that seeks to emulate the upper tier and which is comprised of rich farmers, merchants and small-business owners; and third, those with some educational capital who nevertheless occupy positions low-down within bureaucratic hierarchies. Fernandes and Heller stress that class and caste tend to overlap: middle classes tend to be from higher castes.

There is an important strand of research that has focused on the contemporary social and political practices of the highest tier in Fernandes and Heller's schema: the upper middle classes usually residing in urban India, and especially in the metropolises of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai (e.g. Favero 2005; Harriss 2006; Nijman 2006; Fuller and Narasimhan 2007; Van Wessel 2007). This research suggests that upper middle classes benefited from the liberalization of the Indian economy from the early 1990s onwards. Rich urbanites 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 IT and allied industries in India or to expand their own businesses. Fuller and Narasimhan (2007), in a study of IT workers in Chennai, write of a mood of "prevailing optimism" and a sense among IT professionals of the multiple benefits wrought by the opening up of the Indian economy since the early 1990s (see also Favero 2005).