

What does a focus on “youth” tell us about economic, social and political change in contemporary India?

Every afternoon, as the sun blazons hot and the dogs lay limp in Kamalpur, Rampal sits on his wall and watches the trains whir past to Delhi. After an hour or so, and when the sky is drained of blue, he returns to college, past the large algal pond in town and the uneven wall around the cricket ground (‘half-built because the administration had pocketed the money for its construction’); curving up the street corner (the ‘addas’, where they often ‘hang after class’) before slipping through the jaded clutter of the gymnasium to a small classroom, where other young men like himself sit patiently waiting at desks. Rampal’s social world in the making - his daily movements within a small Indian provincial town - are, like so many young people’s in India today, marked by a sense of ‘in-betweenness’. Young and Jeffrey (2012) write of the importance of theorizing social change and the lives of Indian youth through the lens of those that live “in-between”. This ‘in-betweenness’ they conceptualise in three key senses. First, Rampal occupies the space between rich and poor in the class structure; second, as a young man he is between youth and adulthood in terms of age and life-milestones; and third, in Kamalpur he lives between the rural and urban, sometimes moving between the two.

*Rampal of Kamalpur, Kamalpur of Rampal.* To take as an ontological premise then that the body and space are co-generative, co-emergent, co-mattering. We might say that this *Rampal/Kamalpur* cyborg assemblage-in-the-making embodies the social, economic and political changes and contradictions that mark India’s post-1990 liberalization. For one, *The Economist* - writing shortly before the 2013 Lok Sabha elections - would laud how ‘the village encapsulate[d] the pre-election campaign rhetorics of youth bulge, urbanisation and rising incomes on the ground.



‘This used to be a poor, rural spot’, the article read, ‘but no longer. The town now boasts a tarmac road, a row of tiny barber shops and fields of young green wheat. Half-built concrete towers line an improved highway as the city marches into western Uttar Pradesh (UP). Many locals are giving up farming to sell milk or flowers to the city, or hire out generators. Several toil in textile factories in Noida, the nearest big town.’ In contradiction then, Rampal’s experience of liberalization - ‘youth bulges, urbanisation, rising incomes’ - is less triumphalist. A sense of dissonance emerges between the two social worlds: one of speed,



movement and 'marching' modernity; the other of repetition, boredom, trainspotting.

Fundamentally then, this essay examines how a focus on 'youth', particularly male youth in provincial towns, offers a lens into the economic, social and political changes in contemporary India. By 2020, it is estimated that the average Indian will be only 29 years old, compared with the average age of 37 years in China and the US, and 45 in west Europe and Japan. This youth bulge or 'demographic dividend' (Bloom et. al, 2003) is furthermore expected to occur predominantly in the fast-growing small towns such as Kamalpur 'between' modern India's metropolises and farmlands. Extending on the work of Craig Jeffrey in Uttar Pradesh, I thus stress the significance of an ethnographically sensitive political economy approach to the study of provincial youth, culture and neoliberal transformation, one attuned to both the durability of social inequalities and counterintuitive cultural practice. In this respect, an ethnographic focus on youth offers a critique and checks the triumphalist discourse that neoliberalization is experienced and absorbed uni-directionally, uni-temporally and uni-spatially by a burgeoning young population. Such grounded ethnography offers nuance and opens out the map of India in this respect to volumetric worlds of topographical difference.

More than a theoretical reprise however, such a critique finds material force in the growing sense of discontent, protest and anger by young people throughout India over the poor quality of mass education and the absence of secure salaried jobs. Corbridge et. al (2013) term this the 'negative risk' of India's demographic dividend. Briefly then, I explore how topographical differences of experience flare into both reactionary ('political society') and progressive ('civil society') forms of political protest, competition, collaboration and bargaining with the Indian state. To do so, I return to Kamalpur and Rampal, and explore two 'distinctive cultural fields' - the college and train-station - in which topographical difference is experienced by male youth. It is in these spaces I argue, that proliferate the visceral, contagious and simultaneous images of modernity, progress and failure - movement and stillness, live-time and dead-time, somewhere and nowhere - that young men like Rampal's social worlds play out. Rampal, in this respect, is a walking prism into the economic, social and political changes in contemporary India. A prism and also a fulcrum; for Rampal is not passive in these changes but an active cog in the very machinic choreographies of India's multiplicitous and topographically-uneven neoliberalizing project.

*Between the small country and the bright lights lies the school and the train station.* Yet, following the liberalization of the Indian economy in 1990, young people's experience of these institutions have been deeply unsettled. By 2001, Gooptu (2007) notes, there were nearly 50 percent more young men (21.9 million) between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine than there were between the ages of thirty and forty-four. Taken together then political, economic, and demographic changes worked to produce a cohort of frustrated young men, who had high ambitions but felt as though their paths into successful adulthood had been blocked. Jeffrey (2009) traces the deepening of these problems and the 'broken trajectory effect' (Bourdieu, 1984) to three broad reasons that might easily stretch the sinuous topography of Uttar Pradesh to Kamalpur. First, he writes:

'economic reforms resulted in a marked slowdown in the creation of salaried jobs. Second, liberalization resulted in the increased circulation of images of middle-class urban success on billboards, televisions, newspapers encouraging a rising number of young people to seek "middle-class" jobs at a time when such employment was increasingly scarce. Third, liberalization undermined education and therefore possibilities for young people to establish businesses or migrate in search of skilled, well-paid jobs.

Rampal then - a walking prism - embodies this sense of economic, political and social rupture at the tide of liberalization. His movements between the train station and college draw parallels to the students at Meerut College, who 'often drew out the long oo sound of the Hindi word for 'moving about' - ghūmna - while sweeping their hands through the air to suggest their aimless drifts through the town' (Jeffrey, 2010) I imagine Rampal sitting at his favourite spot again tracing the air and chanting ghūmna to the rhythmic throb of an outgoing Delhi train. Onboard, several boys he'd loosely known and played cricket with from primary school are sat. They are from well connected Jat families and had managed to find jobs in the city through personal contacts, long stints of English-language tutoring and friendly parental donations to prominent, local politicians and industrialists.

In Kamalpur as in Meerut then, Rampal experiences 'timepass' as a concatenation of multiple spatiotemporal insecurities: the disappointment of being unable to acquire secure salaried work like his Jat school friends, despite having spent a long time in formal education, the frustration of being unable to travel on the trains from Kamalpur Station 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. Jeffrey pluralises in this respect Bourdieu's broken trajectory effect, referring to 'broken trajectory effects 'wherein dreams of occupational mobility, progression to adulthood and movement into a modern era disintegrate simultaneously'. Rampal's stillness, as if almost meditative aside the livewire tracks, furthermore stretches to a million other simultaneities of young men stood or sat at crossings, stations, vital conjuncture points, such that; when one speaks of India one speaks of a land of rail-lines and human-lines and broken trajectories that splinter off of the steel girders on the horizontal and slacken to spot trains in deserts.

Kamalpur College as the train station is in this sense also a relational space, always under construction as a sphere of possibility in which distinct trajectories (the Jats and the Dalits for instance) co-exist together (Massey, 2005). The constitution of the social within relational space is equally however a constant, conflictual and contradictory process that mirrors and refracts the broader forces and dynamics within the Indian economy. Here then, young men deploy resources, exchange capitals and reproduce social inequalities along axes of class, gender, caste and age - modes of social competition At the same time however, Kamalpur College's spaces of intense sociality and gathering potential emerge occasionally as seedbeds for collaboration, cross-caste political action and collective mobilization (Jeffrey, 2009). There are traces on Kamalpur's social landscape that refer to these previous struggles: some reactionary, the graffiti behind the worn gymnasium, complaining about university bureaucrats' negligence; some progressive , photographs at the kiosk on the street corner detailing a collective student protest and finally; some in-between, the

whispers that circulate in the small classrooms, of student heroism and humorous displays of *jugād* the day before down at the railway station or at the billboards.

In India then, there is a saying that youth are *'sara-sere'*: fruit that are almost ripe, a little green. Other characteristics attributed to youth include *'khyogtong'* (courageous), *'storophad'* (bold) and *'khyongpo'* (hard-headed, stubborn). In *'Hatke'* Cinema, a relatively new genre of small-budget provincial cinema, using mostly unknown actors and foregrounding realism in social issues rather than melodrama, several such typecasts are present: the *khyogtong*, the *storophad*, the *khyongpo*. At the fore then usually is a young political-entrepreneur who, 'through his occupation of the discrete spaces of the provincial university campus (corridors, classrooms, hostels), and his subsequent infiltration of economically burgeoning sections of the city (railway contracting, real estate, telecommunications) illuminates a long provincial history of crony capitalism, economic liberalization and the democratization of caste. To these illuminations then, one might add that his behaviour crystallizes the 'inventive nature of social reproduction'; how young men, rather than purely absorbing 'from above' neoliberal discourses of self-responsibility extend these very ideas through drawing on indigenous visions of improvisation; 'lashing together different elements, 'twinning' the rural and urban , performing *jugād*.

Provinciality and 'in-betweenness' emerges as a symbolic and cultural resource, and points to the fact that many economic, social and political processes in India occur at the informal, barter-level and between the split micro-geographies of the household, the street and the workplace. *Jugād*, as Birtchnell (2011) suggests, is a complicated word - it can be a verb or noun - yet broadly means 'shrewd improvisation' with the materials at hand, connoting flexibility, inventiveness, pragmatism and guile. Jeffrey and Young (2014) then, drawing on Bourdieu's notion of social dominance as expressed and reproduced through a 'feel for the game', observe how young people in Meerut do not refer to a need to migrate to major urban centers, but instead focus on their microgeographical acuity; on honing a 'feel for the game'.

Back in *Kamalpur* then, belly-full and sat trainspotting, this honing of the game refracts through Rampal's analytical eyelids. He pores over the scene before him: the train snaking east under electricity pylons and billboards, the trainspotters and ware-sellers moving closer along the tracks. Before too long then Rampal notices the wash-man in the distance, an elderly Dalit who descends every morning to clean the train windows



for 100 rupees. Noticing how the hose runs out of water every time, Rampal suggests he use a plastic bottle like the ones that sometimes turn up from the Coca Cola plant in Delhi. *'Put four incisions in its bottom. It will spread the water over a greater surface area.'* In Jeffrey and Young's words then, Rampal's everyday shuttling between different bureaucratic offices, industrial sites and educational spaces generates a sort of innovative, ground-level entrepreneurialism - *jugād* - combining rural and urban tactics, bringing together traditional and modern materials to solve problems. This small episode furthermore traces the material politics of economic and social change in contemporary India that so often rely on small acts of repair, or its negative, disrepair and corruption over the miniature timescales of hours and days. Rampal's *jugād*, which might well end up in the whispering corridors of Kamalpur college, equally then stresses the agential capacities of young men in provincial settings, to walk instead of sit and to change prefiguratively their economic, political and social positioning within the broader choreographies of neoliberalization.

Concluding then, I suggest that a focus on their diverse and volumetric worlds-in-the-making might give us a more nuanced account of economic, social and political change in India: a welcome additive to the ontologically-flat-world quantitative datasets already being collected by the Government of India, World Bank and numerous NGOs on development surrounding agriculture, education, energy, healthcare, manufacturing, water and sanitation, arts & culture & sports. In this respect, I end open-endedly with a beginning: what is the purpose and performativity of geographical research in contemporary India? To make these pillars dance a little, shake the Parthenon's foundations? To be relatable, agential, realist and humanist, problem-solving and forward-thinking? Youthful and youth-*full*? To stare at trains, climb through cabins, hang at 'addas', slip through clutters, run the rail-sands, ask Rampal, listen, look and fall in-between?

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