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Beyond improvisation? The rise and rise of youth entrepreneurs in north India

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I. Introduction

■ In the Indian city of Meerut, in northwest Uttar Pradesh, education seems to be everywhere these days. Crumbling walls are painted in gaudy colors with the names of new secondary schools and tuition centers. Large billboards advertise the latest course offerings at local colleges. Every morning, hundreds of young people take a bus to one of the new campuses that line the major byways running through the city. “The world is here...” proclaims a banner at the gateway of one private college, “...why are you waiting?”

The reality for many young people is very different. In spite of India’s much heralded growth acceleration over the last two decades, official statistics show that the number of formal sector jobs created each year has been considerably less than the number of people entering the labor market for the first time (Corbridge et al 2013; NCEUS 2009). Rather than exploiting a “demographic dividend”, India has witnessed the emergence of a growing cohort of educated but un/underemployed young people whose aspirations seem destined to go unfulfilled (Roychowdhury et al 2006; James 2008). In more provincial cities like Meerut, the problem is often particularly acute (Jeffrey 2010).

In this paper, we explore one of the major paradoxes in the world today: surging demand for higher education in the context of dismal job growth in the formal sector. Instead of focusing on the ideological influence of the World Bank, governments or NGOs, we examine the practices of a cohort of young men who themselves began studying at university in Meerut in the early 2000s. Frustrated by their bleak job prospects, they began to improvise, seizing on whatever short-term opportunities they could find to make money. This included becoming active in student politics, private tuition, and various forms of brokerage, much of it illicit.

We then show how the expansion of policies aimed at liberalizing higher education prompted some of them to change tack. They reigned-in their brokerage and

instead focused on opening their own private colleges. Given the numerous problems they faced, in terms of mobilizing the necessary capital and social connections, they still depended on their well-honed improvisational skills to accomplish this goal. But they viewed establishing and running colleges as a pathway out of a life of ‘improvisation’. By 2012, at least fourteen former students of the twenty-five whom we have tracked since the early 2000s, all of them from rural, lower middle-class families, had succeeded in establishing themselves as wealthy college owners in Meerut district.

Meanwhile, those who were not able to engage in such practices were often left further behind. Many experienced long periods of unemployment or worked intermittently while remaining enrolled in degree programs. In some cases, they were eventually absorbed into the growing economy in private education themselves, as teachers on meager salaries or as brokers trying to drum-up interest in new college courses. In a context of widespread unemployment, they had little means to address their exploitation.

Through our analysis of education markets, we draw attention to new forms of enterprise among aspirational young people in the global South. In doing so, we also extend recent work on improvisation in social science. This includes work on frugal innovation and everyday technologies (Jencks & Silvers 2013; Radjou et al 2012), the provision of basic services (Silver 2014; Livingston 2012; Simone 2004) and the political tactics of the urban poor (Graeber 2013; Benjamin 2008; de Certeau 1984). While this scholarship covers a wide range of practices, it focuses on the resourceful ways in which marginalized people come together to assemble or rework technologies and infrastructures of everyday life. As such, improvisation is generally celebrated as a wellspring of creativity from below that can subvert hierarchies in politics and planning.

Ours is a more cautionary story. Moving beyond work on infrastructure, we link improvisation with emerging forms of youth enterprise. We show how opportunities to engage in improvised forms of politicking and profiteering in the first place were tightly restricted according to class, caste and gender. This worked to the advantage of some middle-class young men who were able to accrue valuable skills, contacts and capital over time. Although college students’ improvisation did not lead directly to employment-generating businesses, it did provide them with a platform from which to launch poor

quality private educational initiatives when the opportunity to invest in a more durable enterprise came along. Our example shows that improvised responses to structural problems, particularly when motivated by individual rather than collective interests, can ultimately work to reinforce patterns of inequality and exclusion. Some middle-class youth in Meerut made a fortune by reproducing and even expanding the very system that produced them as underemployed young people.

- We also show that improvisation is not a social fact associated, for example, with the entrepreneurship of the urban poor (De Soto, 2000) or the social navigation strategies of marginalized youth (Newell 2009). Rather, improvisation may constitute a type of life zone which some sections of society – and, arguably, they are increasing in number – pass through in their movement towards more stable livelihoods be they lucrative, in the case of college owners, or more exploitative, as in the case of most other young people in Meerut. Our argument then, is that a long-term approach usefully spotlights how young people may, for a time, inhabit the role of ‘improviser’ (*jugādu*) and comport themselves with reference to the notion of ‘improvisation’ (*jugād*) but that this is not an inevitable or enduring experience. Opportunities to engage in more stable form of entrepreneurship can emerge over time, providing some young people with a pathway out of improvised livelihoods.

The article is organized as follows. In section II, we situate our work in relation to broader scholarship on youth, economic restructuring and improvisation. Section III provides some context on recent social and economic change in Uttar Pradesh. Section IV focuses on the rise of a new cohort of entrepreneurs in the city of Meerut and their efforts to establish colleges. Section V examines the struggles of teachers and students in response to the liberalization of higher education and poor job prospects. The conclusion recapitulates our major findings and identifies future directions for research on the geographies of youth, cultural organization and political-economic change.

II. Economic Change and Improvisation

In the 1990s, the Indian government began to expand a series of pro-market policies (Kohli 2006). This included measures to reduce import tariffs and business taxes and encourage foreign investment (Chandrasekhar & Ghosh 2002). These policies have

been accompanied by the “rolling out” of various programs encouraging local governments and citizens to become more entrepreneurial and take greater responsibility for their own social and economic wellbeing (Jenkins 1999; Peck & Tickell 2002). In the Indian context, scholars have examined the spread of microfinance programs (Moodie 2008; Young 2010a), the expansion of pay-to-use infrastructure and services (Kundu 2003; Zerah 2009), and the emergence of new – usually, highly exclusionary – spaces of “participatory democracy” (Coelho et al 2013; Harriss 2007).

While India’s GDP growth has made most of the headlines over the last two decades, the relative dearth of “good jobs” that have been created is also now widely noted. A paucity of secure, salaried work is hardly a new phenomenon in India and other parts of the global South (Harriss-White & Gooptu 2001). However, the problem has intensified due to the fact that many more people have completed high school, college courses and other training programs today compared to a generation ago. In India, the number of places on degree courses has increased steeply since the 1990s, and it is expected to continue growing at a compound annual rate of 18% until 2020 (Ernst & Young 2011). Growth in salaried jobs has been much weaker. Between 2000 and 2012, the total number of formal sector jobs increased at a rate of just 2.2% per year, and many of these are low-paying, intermittent positions in construction and retail (NSSO 2014; Varma 2014). In India, as in many other parts of the world, the gap between young people’s aspirations and economic realities seems to be growing.

How are educated young people in the global South responding to these demoralizing trends? A number of studies have focused on their efforts to migrate to large cities or to other countries (Mains 2007; Cohen 2003). Recently, there has also been a spate of work examining young people’s involvement in various forms of protest politics. This includes movements associated with the so-called Arab Spring (Bayat 2013; Honwana 2013), the Occupy protests (Graeber 2013; Sparke 2013) and various other uprisings in Greece, Brazil, Turkey, and beyond (Singer 2014; Standing 2011). The recent anti-corruption movement in India, initially spearheaded by Anna Hazare, also appears to have drawn significant strength from unemployed, middle-class youth (Palshikar 2013; Shukla 2013). Singh (2013) has even spoken of a “global narrative of anger” that unites diverse forms of youth mobilization across the world.

By comparison, we know relatively little about the ways in which young people might be engaging in new forms of entrepreneurship. There is a considerable literature within geography that looks at cultures of enterprise among business elites (Yeung 2009; Olds & Thrift 2005). Multiple studies have explored how national and local governments are becoming more entrepreneurial in order to try and attract private investment (Harvey 1989; Jessop 1997). There is also long-standing interest in the ways in which corporations reorganize their operations to become more competitive (Bathelt et al 2004; Maskell 2001). But the everyday ways in which ordinary young people try to carve out a livelihood in precarious conditions is relatively poorly understood.

An interesting set of studies on this topic is now emerging within the field of youth studies (Gough & Langevang 2016). These works build on earlier research on informal economies in the global South (Belmonte 1979; Hart 1973). For example, Thieme (2010) has written about the resourceful economic practices of young people living in an informal settlement in Nairobi. Rodgers (2010) describes the life of a young man in Nicaragua who continually moves between different sectors of the economy in search of opportunities to earn money. Newell (2009) observes young men and women in Côte d'Ivoire engaging in a "bluff" that involves finding the means to project an image of wealth and success in the face of economic hardship.

What threads many of these studies together is an emphasis on improvisation. Unlike its more glorified counterpart, innovation, the ways in which people improvise has received fairly scant attention from geographers. However, in resource-poor settings the ability to adapt in-the-moment when facing material constraints is a basic requirement of everyday life. Studies have shown how the development of infrastructures (Silver 2014), the provision of health care (Livingstone 2012), and the plying of a trade (Benjamin 2010), often depend on people's capacity to work quickly and creatively with whatever resources they have to hand.

This skill is often expressed through a variety of local idioms. In north India, the Hindi word *jugād* is sometimes used to convey a similar meaning. The classic example of a *jugād* is of an old ox cart that has been fitted with an engine but the term has recently become a buzzword in the media and popular culture. It has been used to describe a wide range of "bottom of the pyramid" innovations, from the production of low-cost sanitary

pads (Venema 2014) to energy-generating spinning wheels (Roy 2011). Indeed, *jugād* – or “Indovation” – is rapidly becoming mythologized as a capacity that all Indians have cultivated out of necessity due to limited resources (Radjou et al 2012).

Notwithstanding these boosterish accounts of Indian ingenuity, other studies have drawn attention to the more negative connotations associated with improvisation and related terms. Birtchnell (2011) has argued that in a context of austerity, *jugād* can sometimes involve cutting corners or constructing substandard products. It can also be used to refer to the ways in which people with power and influence, leverage their social connections to get things done through informal channels. In these cases, *jugād* is often a way to euphemize cases of what might otherwise be called corruption (*bhrashtaachaar*) (Jauregui 2014). Rather than assuming that improvised solutions represent a challenge to established orders, we need to develop embodied accounts of who improvises, how, and to what ends.

We believe that it is also crucial to situate improvisational practices in a longer-term perspective. Accounts of youth enterprise often depict young people engaging in a dizzying array of practices, constantly looking for new ways to make money ‘on the fly’. This can lead to characterisations of young people as inveterately ‘improvisational’, naturally disposed to experimenting with ideas, institutions and materials. Work on subcultures that came out of Cultural Studies in the UK during the 1970 and 80s frequently pointed to examples of youth improvisation, showing how young people adapted plasters, bandages and safety pins in new ways to signify new meanings (Hebdige 1979; Ward 1978). More recently, a wide array of studies of Saharan and Sub-Saharan Africa have depicted young people as inevitably caught up in cycles of improvisational economic practice (e.g. Roitman 2004; Jones 2010). These studies often emphasise how practices of improvisation have congealed to such an extent that a whole system of language and terms are built around the act of improvising. For example, Jones (2010) refers to ‘*kukiya-kiya*’ (zig-zagging) in the activities of young people in urban Zimbabwe.

In these contexts, there is also a type of recursivity built into youth improvisational practice. That is, the thematic priority given to ideas of improvisation within youth practice, not just in scholarship but also in broader cultural and political

arenas (Mankekar 2011), serves in turn to guide young people towards conducting similar forms of improvisation in the future. Knox et al (2006) made a similar point about the material effects of the burgeoning social scientific writing on “networks” in the 1990s. The problem with studies on youth improvisation, especially where they focus only a single period of time, is that they risk unwittingly presenting as a social fact aspects of people’s practices that change as they age or as the context alters. A long-term perspective can instead reveal how individuals move in and out of particular improvisational strategies over time.

Our research in north India takes up these issues by tracking the lives of a group of educated young men over the course of a decade. In doing so, it illustrates how short-term, improvised ways of making money may eventually give way to more stable, long-term careers. It also connects this process to the reproduction of social inequalities within and between different generations. We begin in the following section by providing some context for the wider environment that young people in Meerut were trying to navigate in the early 2000s.

III. Aspirational Youth in Uttar Pradesh

Uttar Pradesh (UP) is India’s most populous State and also one of the poorest. The metropolitan region of Meerut is located in the northwest, some 100kms from Delhi. Its population of roughly 1.4 million includes upper-castes who constitute around 20 percent of the population and tend to dominate high-status government jobs and own large amounts of land. A similar number of households belonging to Hindu middle castes – including Jats and Gujars – are generally not as wealthy but frequently control access to local political and economic resources, particularly in rural parts of the state. The remainder of UP’s population mainly comprises Muslims, Dalits (or Scheduled Castes), and poorer sections of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs). They typically possess few assets and tend to work in the most exploitative conditions.

Having originally emerged as a military base and manufacturing hub, Meerut’s economy has undergone a number of changes in recent years. During the 1970s and 80s, the diffusion of Green Revolution technologies in rural areas surrounding the city enabled farmers belonging to middle castes, particularly Jats, to accumulate greater revenues.

Like higher castes before them, they subsequently looked to extend and deepen their political and economic networks in urban areas. This included investing more money in educating their children, particularly sons, in the hope that they would subsequently be able to access jobs in government bureaucracies (Jeffrey et al 2008).

Demand soon started to grow for college degrees. Chaudhary Charan Singh University (CCSU) was established in Meerut in the 1960s. It is financed by the government and connected to dozens of smaller public colleges across northwest UP, for which it provides accreditation. In the 1990s, young, lower middle-class men began enrolling at CCSU and related colleges in ever-greater numbers, mostly for courses in technology, engineering and social sciences. They anticipated that the degrees they acquired would be their ticket to salaried, white-collar work. The number of young, middle-class women in higher education also increased, more commonly for Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) programs.

In 1996, the UP government responded to the growing demand for higher education by introducing legislation allowing for the creation of private colleges. These private colleges were to be operated on a non-profit basis, accruing only enough money in student fees to cover their operating costs (Agarwal 2009). Other requirements regarding the ratio of students to faculty, and size of campus, were also established. A handful of new colleges emerged over the next few years, most of which enrolled less than 500 students and offered a limited range of technical courses. In a couple of rare instances, colleges grew so rapidly that the owners were granted permission to operate them as independent universities.

One of us, Craig Jeffrey, conducted social research on university education in Meerut City in the period 2003-2004. Jeffrey conducted interviews with roughly 100 students and forty professors over a six-month period and also spent substantial time hanging out in university hostels, tea rooms, and on the street. Jeffrey's interviews with students and professors showed that many of these new colleges were making illegal profits through various hidden fees. Most students in 2003 and 2004 believed that it was nevertheless worth paying the fees. But transforming credentials into salaried jobs would not prove easy for many graduates. Located at the fringes of the National Capital Growth Region and saddled with a reputation for crime and corruption, Meerut was not attracting

the kinds of IT and software work seen in neighboring cities, such as Noida and Ghaziabad. Prized public sector jobs were also increasingly difficult to come by. In 2002, the State government pledged to reduce the number of new positions created within government bureaucracies in order to secure support from the World Bank. These cuts coincided with a shift in the age structure of UP's population, which saw the size of the labor force begin to swell to unprecedented numbers (Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India 2004).

Aspirational Jats and Gujars also faced increasing competition for jobs from lower castes. A farmers' union, dominated by middle caste interests, had exerted considerable influence over regional politics during the 1970s and 80s. But the Bahujan Samaj Party [BSP] was now becoming a significant force. Formed in 1984 to represent the political interests of Dalits, the BSP quickly expanded its support base and became part of several power-sharing coalitions at the State level between 1993 and 2003 (Chandra 2004). During that time, it worked to provide social programs that would increase the number of low caste students attending schools and colleges. Many middle-caste youth felt that the longstanding reservations system, which allocated a certain quota of government jobs to low caste populations, already skewed the playing field against them. They saw rising educational attainment among Dalits as posing an additional threat to their ambitions.

Jeffrey's research in the mid-2000s showed that competition for jobs had become particularly intense among young men by the early 2000s. Women were often able to use B.Ed degrees to become schoolteachers, which was viewed as a 'respectable' profession for them. In other cases, young women had been encouraged to enroll at college as a way to improve their standing on the marriage market, rather than as a gateway to a career. Young men, on the other hand, were often under intense pressure to acquire higher-status positions. They had invested in education in the expectation that this would open up prestigious jobs in government or services. Finding good work was also seen as a critical step in accessing other markers of successful adulthood, such as marriage and financial independence.

There was a widespread sense of frustration and ennui among young men studying in Meerut in 2003-04 (see also Jeffrey 2010). Unable to transition into white-

collar work, many described themselves as engaging in timepass, hanging out at tea stalls and hoping that the situation might change. However, some ambitious Jat men started building careers as student politicians on campus. They used their influence to organize protests against the mistreatment of students. In some cases they also started to make money by acting as intermediaries between university administrators, students and private contractors (see also Kumar 2012).

- A further round of research conducted by Craig Jeffrey and Stephen Young in 2010 found that these improvised forms of small-scale brokerage had expanded, drawing in a number of lower caste youth as well. To be sure, a number of young men remained steadfast in their efforts to assist other students and protest corruption within college administrations and local government bureaucracies (Jeffrey & Young 2012). But a significant number of low caste men who had previously acted as advocates against the exploitation of fellow students were also now making money by engaging in various forms of brokerage. Like Jats students before them, they tended to see their actions not as corruption but as *jugād* or the creative use of limited resources (Jeffrey & Young 2014; Young & Jeffrey 2012).

In the following section, we draw on fieldwork conducted by Stephen Young and Satendra Kumar over the course of three months in 2012. Interviews were conducted in English and Hindi with 42 men from low and middle caste backgrounds, who were attending, had graduated from, or worked at colleges in and around Meerut. We also interviewed a smaller sample of women, which we use to further develop our arguments about social exclusions in Section V. The interviews focused on how young people from different social backgrounds reflected on and responded to the struggle to find salaried work.

This is not a panel study in the strict sense because we primarily relied on snowball sampling rather than following an exclusive set of actors over a period of time. Nevertheless, a core group of around twenty-five interlocutors had been interviewed by Jeffrey in 2003-04 and/or by Jeffrey and Young in 2010. We therefore situate this more recent material in relation to earlier work in order to provide a longer view of social change in Meerut. Note that we have used pseudonyms for all our interlocutors throughout the paper.

IV. Breaking Out

“Since I could not achieve my aspirations, even after having BA, MA and PhD degrees, I decided to do something,” remarked Kewal when we interviewed him in 2012. A Jat man, now in his mid-30s, Kewal is the Principal and co-owner of a private college in Meerut. He had welcomed us with a tour of the college premises. A loud generator near the entrance kept the lights and air conditioning running in the main reception area. There were half a dozen classrooms with chalkboards and wooden tables and chairs. A library equipped with a modest selection of old books had also been constructed. It was still a work in progress, Kewal told us, but there were already plans to open another college close by.

Kewal’s journey from student to college owner was far from straightforward. A decade earlier, having completed numerous degrees at CCS University, he was increasingly demoralized at the dearth of good jobs in the region. Even lower-level civil servant positions seem to attract thousands of applications. Determined to confront the situation, he became involved in student politics. Along with some of his peers, he organized students in an effort to address what he saw as the injustices faced by educated young people, including rising fees, teacher absenteeism, and corruption within the university system.

Kewal was one of around twenty Jat student leaders who, at the same time, began making money by operating as brokers on campus. For example, many students, particularly from rural areas, felt ill equipped to navigate the university bureaucracy. They would approach prominent students who, for a fee, would assist them in finding a place in a university hostel or accessing transcripts, for example. Some Jats were able to build a reputation as improvisers (*jugādu*), not just among students but also with private contractors and university administrators. Kewal recalls that this gave them significant leverage when dealing with obstinate officials. Administrators knew that because of their role in various protests they were capable of mobilizing a group of students at short notice if their demands went unmet.

But where was the money they were making from these various schemes going? In part it was a stopgap that helped them to string out their time on campus in the absence

of a regular income. But they were aware that this kind of frenzied brokering could not carry on indefinitely. After a couple of years, as the amount of money they were earning increased, a new possibility opened up. A number of student leaders had been further supplementing their income by offering private tuition, by this time a huge informal economy in Meerut. In some instances, they ran classes from their homes. Those who had more resources were able to rent small offices, which they branded as training or tuition centers for young people looking to expand their suite of qualifications or swot-up for government exams. Given the growing demand for degrees, many now considered using the money they were making from tuition and politics to significantly scale-up these operations and open their own colleges.

Establishing a college required an amount of money that was seemingly beyond the reach of even the more affluent students in Meerut. A number of ambiguities and loopholes in the official regulations did offer some hope. One critical factor was the official designation of Meerut as a “metropolitan region”. The cost of land in larger, metro regions is generally higher than in smaller cities. Consequently, the government declared that a private college in these areas required only five acres of land, instead of ten. That made setting up an institution in Meerut considerably cheaper than in many surrounding cities. Moreover, increasing household investments in private education meant that some landowners were willing to sell in order to continue financing their children’s education. Agricultural land on the peripheries of Meerut became prime real estate for aspiring college entrepreneurs.

Kewal was one of the first to see this opportunity. He recalls: “By 2006, I had become aware that the rules regarding the building of a college were very loose. At that time, many people were starting colleges in rented buildings or houses, and then later constructing their own buildings.” To take advantage of this opportunity, Kewal had to mobilize the social connections he had made as a broker, often at short notice. This meant leaving his differences with other politicians behind. “During the student days on campus we were rivals to each other,” he noted. “We were in different political parties. But then we all started helping each other in business and developed a more cordial relationship.” The Vice Chancellor of CCSU at that time was also a Jat. Kewal recalls that he was instrumental in encouraging himself and a dozen or so other Jat students to seize the

moment to start up their own colleges. This personal link was critical because it ensured that, even if they had to cut corners on construction and staffing, their colleges would stand a good chance of receiving the formal accreditation that was required to begin enrolling students.

Money was still an issue, in spite of the favorable ruling in terms of land requirements. Kewal told us that he had to borrow an additional Rs. 5 lakhs [approximately US\$ 7000] from relatives to start his college. With building work still at relatively early stages, he received approvals required to start enrolling students in a B.Ed program. Having already run coaching classes and established a reputation in local politics, Kewal had easy access to a group of students whom he could encourage to register at the college. In the first year, the college made around Rs. 80 lakh. He reinvested the profit in more land and started exploring opportunities to open another institution in a neighboring village.

The amount of profit Kewal accrued in one year indicates that this new class of college owners was making far more than was permitted by government regulations. This incentivized more young men to try and take advantage of this opportunity. We also interviewed Kuldeep in 2012. He had started a computer-training center just outside of Meerut in 2000, while he was still a student. In 2004, he purchased some land in Pohalli, a village close to city. He started constructing his college using money made from tuition, student politics and also from family loans, and enrolled students in courses before the construction was complete. Although it contravened official regulations, he was able to use his contacts to find spare rooms at other colleges to hold exams. It was with the money from these fees that he was eventually able to finish constructing his first institution.

A number of interviewees argued that they moved away from more diverse forms of brokerage into private education because it seemed like the only way to move forward with their lives at that point. A Jat man named Brajesh was particularly frank about the dilemmas he had faced. During our interview, he acknowledged the problems he saw in many of the private colleges that had emerged around Meerut, including his own. Infrastructure was often not up to standard, students and faculty frequently lacked resources and motivation, and the sector as a whole was increasingly seen as a site for

profiteering. Yet, in a context of such bleak job growth, he maintained that many of his generation had been forced to accept that this was a rare and possibly fleeting opportunity to establish a business. This is similar to Smith's (2007) findings regarding the moral ambiguities expressed by young men in Nigeria who become involved in various financial scams. It also resonates with the words on one of the men interviewed by Mantz (2008) in his study of illegal coltan mining in the Congo: "you must do what comes to you" (p. 44).

Due to the skills and connections they had forged through their brokerage, Jat entrepreneurs had a significant advantage over other students when entering business. But they were by no means the only ones who were looking for opportunities in the higher education sector. A number of wealthy industrialists had already begun investing in colleges. Politicians too had started allying with businessmen to start colleges, leading to allegations that it was a way to launder their illegal earnings. But Jat entrepreneurs were keen to distinguish themselves from these local bigwigs. Not being from wealthy backgrounds, they argued, they had to constantly work to find inventive ways to compensate for their lack of resources. One young college entrepreneur, Surinder, explained to us: "rich people have money, so they can just pick up local people to get their work done. But for people like us, we have the advantage that we are hard working [bahut mehnati] and we understand local politics and society [samajh]." They stressed that they had to rely on "street smarts" and their instincts for improvising with whatever resources they could find [*jugād*], skills they believed they had developed due to their relatively humble, rural backgrounds. Some college entrepreneurs even saw this capacity for shrewd opportunism as being a characteristic of their generation, one that had been let down by the promise of India's economic rise.

The ways through which young men tried to advance their lives also depended on their spatial mobility. As student leaders they had become accustomed to moving between villages, university buildings, local government offices, and District Magistrates when trying to address various problems. Many of them felt that this had stood them in good stead for building their careers as college entrepreneurs. As entrepreneurs they had to have a knack for being in the right place at the right time, and knowing where to turn if the situation did not yield results. Similarly, Jones' (2010) argues that youth in Zimbabwe

see themselves as having to zig-zag as they try to unlock opportunities to make a living. Langevang & Gough (2009) also emphasize the importance of everyday mobility in lives of unemployed youth in Ghana (see also Young 2010b). This kind of movement was fundamental to the enterprise of young men in Meerut.

Fig 1: Map showing location of college goes here

In total, more than a hundred new private colleges were opened in Meerut between 2003 and 2012, fanning out across the main intersections of the city [see Map 1]. Most of the fourteen college entrepreneurs we interviewed had opened several colleges, extending further into Meerut's hinterland, and were making very large sums of money. Some of them shied away from referring to their earlier forms of improvised brokerage by that point, probably because they were aware of that it might have negative connotations now that they had money and power. The ability to hone in on momentary opportunities was still evident though. We were given a first-hand lesson in this during some of our interviews. Sensing that this would be a good publicity opportunity, an interviewee would secretly arrange for a photographer to be waiting outside the college entrance at the end of our conversation. To our surprise, a camera bulb would flash as we were shaking hands and saying goodbye. The following day a short story would appear in a local newspaper suggesting that we had been discussing a possible academic exchange program. This happened four or five times during the fieldwork and reflects a common practice among youth entrepreneurs of trying to use the media to build their profile. It was all part of staying one step ahead of the rest of the field.

V. Falling Behind

While a small set of college entrepreneurs thrived, many young people in Meerut felt like they were being left further behind. We met Narendra briefly during one of our college tours in 2012. A shy, mild-mannered man, he had also attended CCSU as a graduate student during the early 2000s. Now, he was working as a teacher at one of the new private colleges. Trying to not draw too much attention to himself, Narendra handed

us a small slip of paper with his phone number on and suggested we meet to talk later in the week.

Two days later, over tea and snacks at a hotel, Narendra told us the story of how he had become a college lecturer. As a student at CCSU he was bright and diligent. He could frequently be found poring over books in the campus library. He was a Jat and was on friendly terms with some of the local student leaders. But Narendra himself never entered student politics. He was not from a particularly well-off family. More importantly, he was not regarded on campus as someone who possessed the hustle and quick wits necessary to thrive as a political intermediary. Consequently, his life had followed a very different trajectory to some of his peers.

After graduating, Narendra had initially planned to find a position as a lecturer in a public university, which would offer a salary and some job security. In 2005, having failed to acquire a government position, he applied to a private college instead. The owner was someone he had known from his student days, so he was confident he would get hired. What salary he would be paid was a more vexing issue. “Everyone has to bargain when they join a private institute,” he told us. “The owners will say ‘we can only pay you this much’. So, you just have to try and bargain for the best salary you can get. If you have more qualifications this can help.” Narendra managed to negotiate a salary of Rs. 14,000 a month, equivalent to just over US\$ 200, which was less than a third of the official rate in the public sector. He had not received a raise for six years.

This figure surprised us given that government regulations stipulate a much higher minimum faculty wage in private colleges. When asked about this Narendra grinned and took out his cell phone. He showed us a text message indicating that Rs. 20,000 had been deposited in his account by the college that month. “Here”, he said pointing at the phone, “you see that the owners have transferred the correct amount. But I have to return Rs. 6,000 because that is the salary I negotiated. That’s how it works.” He went on to explain that many faculty exist in name only, in order to give the appearance that colleges are meeting the required faculty-student ratios. Narendra continued: “a teacher in one college will approach one or two colleagues – for example, one in English, one in Math and one in Chemistry – and propose that they form a group. This group will then approach another college with a portfolio containing their CVs and personal

information. The owner of the college will interview them. If he is happy, he will list them as faculty at the college. Of course, they will never actually teach there. But they will open an account and receive bankcards and every month a salary from the college will be deposited into this account. They usually get to keep a small amount of the money in return.” Other teachers we spoke with confirmed that this practice was fairly widespread in Meerut.

- Faculty were also under pressure to recruit students in order to keep their jobs. From 2010 onward, many of the new colleges started expanding the range of courses they offered. Programs in fashion, fine art, and architecture, usually the preserve of elite institutions in major cities, started appearing on billboards for colleges in Meerut. Drumming up interest in these courses, which were hardly areas in which job recruitment was expanding in Meerut, was not easy. Even the more mainstream degrees were beginning to tap out interest by this point due to the rapid increase in places available. Narendra said that all teachers were charged with trying to recruit as many new students as possible, particularly from their home villages. They got a commission – or a “consultancy fee” – for each admission. But if the numbers dropped, they might find themselves without work.

In spite of their obvious frustrations, teachers’ efforts to organize in response to these practices had been limited and largely unsuccessful so far. In a context of such widespread unemployment, Narendra said it was difficult to assert any leverage in terms of wages and working conditions. Moreover, private colleges often bought-off those who did try to front such a movement. They received a better salary, a place on the Board of Trustees, or a chance to become a partner in a new college. The repetition of this cycle had left many teachers convinced that it was best to treat any organizations claiming to work on their behalf with considerable caution.

Among students, there were mixed feelings about the rise of college entrepreneurs. Some expressed dismay at the situation. Young Dalit men in particular, were often incensed by some of the practices of private college owners. One such man, Ashish, complained to us, “they [college owners] take 5,000 rupees for exam fees, 20,000 rupees for attendance fees – they call all students and tell them their attendance is too low to take the exam – another 3,000 rupees to issue the degree...This is how they can open a

new college every year!” Other Dalit students told us that college owners were working with brokers who collected information about Scheduled Caste youth so that they could be registered, against their knowledge, in one of their programs. The college owner would then claim a subsidy from the state that was supposed to offset that student’s tuition costs.

Most Dalit men simply lacked the resources and the social connections to be able to improvise in the same way as middle-caste students. In our research, we did not identify a single college owner who was from a low caste background. Some did try to draw attention to the problems that students faced. The BSP had won an outright majority in the UP State Assembly elections of 2007 and this clearly boosted the self-confidence and assertiveness of some budding Dalit politicians. But their efforts did little to dent the relentless profiteering among college owners. By 2012, many had grown disillusioned with the BSP, which was itself embroiled in accusations of corruption and collusion with elites.

It would be wrong though, to suggest that everyone outside of the college entrepreneurs saw the situation in entirely negative terms. For example, a few of the young, middle-class women we interviewed saw signs of a positive, if somewhat contradictory, development. Privatization had led to the opening up of more colleges in rural areas surrounding Meerut. Middle-class parents were often apprehensive about allowing their daughters to travel to a city – particularly Meerut – to attend college. It was seen as dangerous and also reduced the amount of work that they could do in the home. The possibility of a shorter commute to an institution that was closer to home had allowed some of them to enroll in programs that might otherwise have been off limits.

One young woman we spoke with, Prem, talked enthusiastically about she had been able to persuade her father to allow her to continue her studies if it did not interfere with her working on the family land. She had completed a B.Ed and was now teaching at a private college. “Women who are oriented towards professional and skill-based courses, can find jobs now”, she told us. It is important to point out it was only middle and lower middle-class women who told us such stories. Nevertheless, this does show that even in a sector dominated by an exclusionary, masculine culture of enterprise, the reproduction of social inequalities was not completely straightforward. Young women

may have been effectively excluded from the more lucrative brokerage networks connected to the sprawling higher education economy. But they were sometimes able to draw on ideas about female respectability in order avail themselves of new opportunities to become students and teachers at private colleges.

A new generation of young Jat and Gujar students were also enrolled at CCSU and other public and private colleges in 2012. Faced with a similar set of constraints, some of them had already developed ideas about emulating the entrepreneurs that had gone before them. The government was attempting to tighten some regulations by this point, following the exposure of various scams in local media. But many students said that it was still possible to make money in the education sector if one had good contacts, knew the loopholes (*kami*), and could improvise (*jugāḍ*). They occupied the same spaces on campus – outside the canteen, by the tree outside the library – where they would sit together until called into action on some errand. Their learning did not come from books in library. Books seem to have little to say about the social world they were moving in. Instead, they shared stories about what was happening in Meerut: who had been arrested, who was running in the student elections, and, most importantly, who was making money. And they waited for their own opportunities to come along.

VI. Conclusions

In recent years, many parts of the global South have experienced a surge in demand for college degrees and other kinds of credentials. This has often happened in tandem with the increasing marketization of higher education, in public as well as private institutions. It is clear that many people are investing in education with the expectation that this will enable them to find “good jobs”, which generally means salaried, white-collar work in the government or corporate sector. Yet, such expectations are frequently confounded by data on job growth. Even in countries like India, which has experienced a significant acceleration in GDP growth over the last two decades, there has only been a modest increase in the number of new jobs created in the formal sector. Still, private investment in education has continued to grow.

Given this scenario, we might expect to see a cooling of aspirations among young people and the formation of countercultures that reject formal education as an avenue for upward social mobility (Demerath 2002; Willis 1977). This certainly has not been the case in India, where enrollment in college is expected to keep rising. We may also expect to find educated young people at the forefront of new political movements aimed at addressing their plight (Honwana 2013; Graeber 2013). But in northwest UP, such protests have generally been sporadic, short-lived and very selective in the kinds of demands that have been made. Migration was also not a common strategy among the young people we interviewed, although some expressed an interest in moving to Delhi.

We have instead highlighted how a group of unemployed young men tried to find a toehold in the local economy. This initially involved cultivating improvisational skills through their involvement in a wide variety of brokerage networks. But the most successful improvisers eventually came to refocus their energy on a specific emerging area of the local economy. The passing of new laws allowing for the creation of private colleges, supposedly on a non-profit basis, opened up a window for them to build their own institutions in Meerut and its hinterlands, extending the very system that had effectively failed them. Setting up colleges gradually became a relatively routine practice for middle-class young men, not a tactic improvised in the moment. One of our central arguments then is that improvisation is not indelibly linked to the activities of 'youth'. Rather, young people may adopt and abandon improvisational styles as they move through the life course. At the same, this doesn't imply a clean break with the past. Improvisation can serve as an important staging post from which some young people are subsequently able to gain a more secure foothold in the economy.

Following on from this, a second key argument concerns the role of improvisational economies in reproducing social inequalities. In work on urban politics and everyday infrastructures and technologies, improvisation is often cast in a positive light, seen as a form of resistance against powerful institutions. But improvisation does not happen in a vacuum of power. In our research, young women were effectively excluded from such opportunities as they were seen as lacking the implicitly masculine traits required to shrewdly improvise. Moreover, less privileged students, including poorer Jats, were also locked out of improvisational economies. By 2012, many were

themselves struggling to seek out a living on the fringes of the private education market. This underscores the importance of differential access to improvised and, in this case semi-criminal, livelihoods to emerging forms of class and caste differentiation in the context of economic liberalization in India.

Our study raises also important questions about how we might study the economic lives of educated young people in the global South. At a theoretical level, a number of scholars, including many feminist geographers, have argued that distinctions such as the informal/formal economy are unstable and porous (Gibson-Graham 2006; Nagar et al 2002). Focusing on how particular skills such as improvisation, which we have shown to be critical to how people navigate the economic landscape, can help to further destabilize and politicize these binaries. More importantly though, it can show how diverse economies – private education and political brokerage in this case – become articulated together.

Finally, from a methodological standpoint, we want to emphasize the value of conducting more long-term research into the economic lives of young people. Most studies provide a somewhat fleeting snapshot of socio-economic change at a particular moment in time. By contrast, we have patched together multiple rounds of qualitative research in Meerut. In doing so, we have been able to tell a more complex story about young people's lives and about the links between economy change and cultural organization more generally. We are arguing therefore, for an approach to studying social power that is attentive to certain critical periods of time in peoples lives but that can also situate those moments in a long-term perspective.

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