

Now:

Prefigurative Politics through a North Indian Lens

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Abstract

This paper focuses on “prefigurative politics”—embodying in the present one’s vision of the future—among young people in north India in order to contribute to wider debates on oppositional politics, temporality, India, and youth. Building on recent fieldwork in Uttarakhand and Uttar Pradesh, we highlight the ubiquity of civic-minded prefigurative politics among a subset of young men and young women. We also examine the temporality of this prefigurative politics, which, like other recent prefigurative movements across the world, emphasizes acting in the present, in the sense of the ongoing passage of time. Young people in north India tend to view the future not as a point on the horizon but as the precipitate of their daily activities. Finally, our paper—in identifying the energetic attempts of young people within and beyond India to engage in social action—provides a counterpoint to negative stereotypes of youth circulating in the media and some scholarly circles.

Keywords: Future, India, Prefigurative, Politics, Now, Temporality, Youth

Now:

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Now is everywhere in India. In 2009, I was in north India talking to Jaipal, a BA degree holder from a Dalit (low caste) family. He lives in a village in western Uttar Pradesh (UP). Like many Indian youth, he has failed to turn his education into secure employment. He feels dispirited.

“No one comes to talk to us,” Jaipal complained in his rural home, “Even the dogs don’t approach the empty-handed.”

“Can politicians help?” I asked.

“They’re useless.”

“Bureaucrats?”

“The same - maximum corrupt.”

“So what can you do?”

“The only way is to do things yourself. I’ve just got on and done it myself. I’ve set up an adult literacy scheme, got sports facilities for children, and helped people with their medical supplies. I’m fed up waiting for politicians.”

This paper focuses on the effectiveness and temporality of ‘prefigurative politics’—embodying in the present one’s vision of the future—among young people in north India. In the next section of the paper we introduce the idea of prefigurative politics. We then develop our account of such politics through reference to the everyday activities of young people in Uttarakhand and western UP, north India. Our material highlights young people’s positive social action in India. We emphasize how youth often channel political effort into everyday forms of fairly individualized political action in the present. They understand the future as an emergent property of this current practice. We refer to the contradictions associated with these daily political and social activities and

how their prefigurative politics sometimes reinforces inequalities. The conclusion links our material to wider literature on youth and prefigurative politics.

Now is the Future

Boggs (1977: 2) defined prefigurative politics as, “The embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture and human experience that are the ultimate goal”. Prefigurative politics is distinct from straightforwardly protesting against a dominant regime because activists’ energies are self-consciously channeled into the performance in the present of some future ‘change’. In this optic, ‘change’ might be to a more authoritarian world as well as to a democratic one. Golden Dawn in Greece and Hitler youth are examples of prefigurative politics. But since the 1960s the discussion of prefigurative politics has focused on anti-hierarchical mobilizations, especially anarchist movements. According to Gordon (2008: 56), a primary objective of anarchism was, “To inhabit, to the greatest extent possible, social relations that approximate anarchists’ ideals for society as a whole.” In practice this meant opposition to hierarchical relations of authority and an everyday commitment to a particular type of decentralized democratization.

Prefigurative politics has a long and diverse history. For example, feminists have developed the notion of prefigurative politics. It is often held that feminist institutions and movements should provide an atmosphere of care, respect, and solidarity (e.g. Eder et al. 1995). Other examples of prefigurative politics include the Diggers movement in Britain in the 1660s (Gurney 1994), the Paris commune (Ross 1988), Gandhianism (Devji 2012), worker writers’ groups (Woodin, 2005), and the Black Panther Party in the US (Singh 2004). In most of these cases prefiguration was closely tied to engagement with the everyday business of living. Demonstrators during the Paris

Commune, for example, were determinedly focused on transforming mundane spaces of living (Ross 1988).

Yet prefigurative politics has been especially evident in the 2010s, reflecting impatience about social inequalities, disappointment with formal politics, and a resurgence of anarchism (Biekart and Fowler 2013). Such politics is manifest in the World Social Forum, Brazilian school movement, Occupy, the Indignados in Spain, and some aspects of the agitations across North Africa and the Middle East in 2010 and 2011, later dubbed ‘the Arab Spring’. The Occupy Movement is a striking example of prefigurative politics in action. Occupy activists encouraged new recruits to put aside specific demands and focus instead on constructing camps that modeled the future. These camps were mini-societies in waiting, containing libraries, kitchens, medical clinics, livestream video teams, entertainment committees, and sanitation squads (Mitchell 2012; Graeber 2013). The UK squatter’s movement provides a parallel example. Their sites contain everything from bike shops to public universities, from yoga classes to lectures on radical design (Vasudevan 2014).

Youth aged between 18 and 30 are often particularly involved in this re-emergence of prefigurative politics. Marx and Engels’ (1978: 234) famously viewed youth, as “alchemists of the revolution” a term they used disparagingly to refer to young people’s idiosyncratic, headstrong approach to politics. Stanley Hall (1904) likewise wrote of youth as a time of “storm and stress”. More recently, powerful institutions have promoted similar ideas, and it is notable that in the international media ‘youth’ (usually men) often figure as violent, immature political subjects. Yet young people aged 18-30 are involved in a wide variety of progressive movements in the contemporary world and a still broader set of more everyday forms of civic action. Youth have been particularly negatively affected by contemporary capitalist change in many parts of the globe and are often especially disenchanted with formal politics (Durham 2008). At the same time, their proximity to childhood and relative lack of investment in the status quo can lend to their actions an innovative, even

playful, quality that other political actors often lack. In most parts of the world, a rise in education has exposed young people to notions of citizenship and rights (Arnot 2009), and the communications revolution has offered young people, especially, new opportunities to experiment with identities and broadcast ideas (Nanabhai and Farmanfarmaian 2011; Bayat 2013a; 2013b). In addition, powerful institutions often invoke children and youth as emblems of the future (Edelman 2004; Durham 2008), and young people can sometimes appropriate such discourses to project themselves as embodiments of a world to come.

The effectiveness of prefigurative politics is a moot point. Prefigurative politics cannot be abandoned when it ceases to be of strategic value, since it is not only a means to an end but the end itself performed in the present (Breines 1989). There are also more specific critiques of prefigurative practice in its anarchist guise. Lipset and Altbach (1969) argued that the prefigurative actions of the student movement in the West in the late 1960s were largely ineffective. In their view youth prefigurative politics was “expressive” rather than “instrumental” and had no clear vision of how to win power. In this optic, those involved in prefigurative politics lack what Appadurai (2013: 189) termed “the capacity to aspire”: the ability to imagine different visions of the future, hold these various imaginings in one’s head simultaneously, and devise ways of reaching especially desired futures through reflexive social practice. Somewhat similar criticisms emerged in response to the wave of anti-globalization protest in the 2000s and 2010s. Scholars argued that the Global Justice Movement (GJM) and Occupy Movement privileged spectacle over substance, lacked a coherent overall agenda, and failed to achieve lasting change (see Graeber 2011; Chomsky 2012). These debates over the utility of prefiguration sometimes emerge within prefigurative political movements themselves. In an analysis of anti-capitalist organizations connected to the GJM in Spain, for example, Fominaya (2010) describes conflicts between those favoring prefigurative tactics and those who regarded such practices as wholly ineffectual (see also De

Carvalho 2012). There were analogous tensions within the Occupy Movement between ideas of the camp as exemplary society and the camp as seedbed for protest (Schneider 2013).

The alleged strategic naivety of prefigurative politicians also renders their action liable to being co-opted or degenerating into practices that sustain the status quo. For example, Vasudevan (2014) refers to neoliberal planning authorities appropriating squatter settlements in Western Europe, which moved from being radical commentaries on the capitalist city to commoditized spaces of “alternative living”. Similarly, Errasti et al. (2003) show that Mandragon Cooperative model of manager-less work in Spain was so successful that it came to compete with multinationals and, in the process, began imitating the exploitative labour practices that they had set out to critique.

Consideration of how the past, present, and future feature in prefigurative action – and of the larger question of the different temporalities of prefigurative action - might enhance analysis of its effectiveness. Prefigurative politics sometimes rests upon a self-conscious denial of the past. In the Anonymous Movement, for example, participants efface their personal and wider history as a precondition of participation, and Maoist leaders in central India are required to engage in a similar renunciation of the past (Shah 2014). In other cases people draw on the past to develop prefigurative programmes. The San Francisco diggers movement of the 1960s looked back to the British example three centuries earlier, for example, and the Occupy Movement built on Calvinist Protestant ideas (Schneider 2013).

Some forms of prefigurative politics operate with a clear sense of a post-revolutionary resting place. For example, McConnell (2009) highlights the capacity for Tibetan refugees in India to construct an alternative Government in Exile as a precursor to a future Tibetan government in Tibet. But several scholars have argued that the present became overwhelmingly important in society and politics in the late twentieth century (Guyer 2007; Gordon 2008). The rise of new

technologies that compress time and space (Harvey 1990), the ascendancy of capitalist institutions that emphasize the present as a site of self-realization (Jameson 2002; Guyer 2007), and the sheer uncertainty of life (Johnson-Hanks 2005) encourage people to focus on the present. For example, Lazar (2014) documents the preoccupation of protesters in Ecuador with the laborious process of negotiating with authorities in pursuit of immediate goals – what she terms ‘attritional time’ – in contrast to activity oriented towards a definite end point. Other studies concentrate more closely on activists’ preoccupation with specific ‘events’ in the present (McAdam and Sewell 1999; see also Das 1990). Student agitators in the late 1960s as well as Occupy activists in the 2010s often made great play of their concentration on ‘the present moment’ understood as an ‘event’ of unprecedented historical importance (Schneider 2012; Pinder 2013). Indeed, Gordon (2008) argues for a shift in the late twentieth century from a concern among anarchists with ‘revolution’ to a celebration of the present – sometimes as an ‘event’ or sometimes in the sense simply of ‘the everyday’ - for its own sake. At the extreme, the prefigurative element of prefigurative politics may disappear altogether.

Anthropologists have stressed the multiple ways in which time is experienced in different settings across the world (Gell 1992; see Bear 2014). It is possible that people involved in prefigurative politics may depart from linear conceptions of time to reflect more on time as cyclical, as Parry (1994) shows in his ethnography of the cultural politics of death in the Indian holy city of Benares. Alternatively, people may define the future as a continuation of the present rather than as a point ahead.

In this paper we highlight the partially effective prefigurative action of young people in north India, focusing not on large social movements but the fairly individualized and mundane activities of young people who play leadership and mentoring roles in the places in which we have conducted fieldwork. We draw attention to the ubiquity of a form of self-conscious prefigurative

politics among youth social actors in provincial India and some similarities in how they conduct political action at the everyday level.

Our account emerges from two extended periods of social research in north India. Between 2012-2014, we carried out a total of thirteen months research in Bemni between us, examining the social and political practices of educated unemployed or underemployed youth, part of a wider project on the political actions of young people in Nepal, Uttarakhand, and Sri Lanka. We conducted at least two interviews with a total of 36 young men and 24 young women aged between 18 and 30 in Bemni, roughly half of all those in this cohort living in the village. These interviews focused especially on their social background, economic activity, views and practices related to marriage, work, health, education, social movements, and the state.

The paper also draws upon research conducted by the first author in 2004-2005 in Meerut, western Uttar Pradesh. This research considered employed and underemployed young people's involvement in student political action in Meerut and their everyday interactions with university and government officials. This research highlighted the capacity of educated un/underemployed young men, to a greater extent than young women, to critique established practices of dominance, even while some student politicians became heavily involved in corruption themselves (First author 2010).

There were differences in the nature of youth mobilization in Bemni as compared to Meerut, for example related to the greater politicization of caste in Uttar Pradesh. But there were also remarkable similarities between the political activities of young people in Bemni and their counterparts in Meerut. In both Bemni and Meerut young people were engaged in a similar range of everyday political actions concerned principally with education, health, infrastructure and development and oriented around various projects aimed at assisting members of their kin or

community. In both places young people involved in such political work often stressed their refusal to wait for government and political parties to deliver benefits. They emphasized the importance of acting immediately on one's own to improve the local social environment based upon an ethic of civility. In addition, young people in both places tended to reject talk of a future 'utopia', focusing instead on the future as "what happens from now on" (*age chalkar*). These 'similarities across difference' (Hart 2002) in the practice of everyday youth politics and in the manner in which young people reflected on their action provide the logic for bringing together materials from different settings in a single paper.

We develop these points in the paper, and relate them to the wider literature on prefiguration and youth action, through discussing four 'analytic sets' of young people (two in Bemni, two in Meerut): first, relatively wealthy but underemployed General Caste (GC) young men in Bemni who worked as citizen activists; second, relatively wealthy but underemployed GC young women in Bemni, who acted as self-styled motivators; third, unemployed Dalit (formerly known as 'untouchable') young men in Meerut who worked as lobbyists for poor Dalit male students in the city; and fourth, relatively wealthy but underemployed young women in Meerut. In each case these young people self-consciously practiced a form of everyday prefigurative politics that bears comparison with some of the youth prefigurative social movements that have occurred in recent years.

Our overall contribution is to show that a significant subset of the youth with whom we worked in north India emphasize their role as civic everyday social intermediaries. This social action is partially effective, for example undermining some forms of corruption and providing role models for others in society. Young people used visions of the past to develop these prefigurative styles and typically worked with an emergent vision of the future as what happens "from now on" (*age chalkar*).

Bemni, Uttarakhand

Containing about ten million people in 2011, Uttarakhand achieved rapid economic growth in the 2000s and has a slightly high literacy rate (79%) than the national average. Yet per capita income is slightly below the national average and poverty - at 40% of the population - is well above the all-India figure. Three-quarters of the population depend on agriculture and technological inputs, infrastructure, and health facilities in the State are notoriously poor.

Since the 1970s, popular protests have been common in Uttarakhand. Forests cover roughly 60 percent of the largely mountainous State (Office of the Registrar General 2011). Under the British colonial regime, forests were largely appropriated by the state (Rangan 2001), a trend that was continued by successive postcolonial state regimes. In the early 1970s, popular anger at the degradation of the forests led to the formation of the “Chipko movement” aimed at protecting the environment and similar issues were raised twenty years later during the Uttarakhandi campaign for the establishment of a separate State (Mawdsley 1997).

Roughly three-quarters of Uttarakhand’s population are upper caste, also called “General Castes” [GCs]) and 17 percent were Scheduled Caste (SC) in 2011 (Office of the Registrar General 2011). There is close overlap between people’s caste status and their access to land, social contacts, and salaried work in Uttarakhand (see Dyson 2006; 2008; 2010). But higher castes are frequently only marginally better off than SCs in Uttarakhand, and until recently economic disparities within the GCs in rural areas were not especially marked. Strong gender norms are characteristic of rural areas; women are often discouraged from engaging in paid employment outside the household, for example, and women’s development indicators are below those of men (Moller 2003; Klenk 2010).

The village of Bemni is located in a relatively remote part of Uttarakhand bordering Tibet at an altitude of about 2500 metres. People typically practice a form of agro-pastoralism; they cultivate crops for subsistence and manage large areas of the surrounding forest for pastoral use. The government greatly increased its development assistance to rural areas of Uttarakhand during the 2000s and early 2010s. In Bemni, ninth and tenth classes were added to the local secondary school, a tele-communications tower was constructed; electricity arrived, and a dirt road connecting the village to the local town became usable in 2012.

Since 2000, Bemni has also become absorbed into processes of regional change: 52 percent of households had at least one cell phone in 2012, compared to less than one percent in 2003. Schooling levels rose sharply over the 2000s and early 2010s. For example, 87 percent of Bemni's men and 75 percent of its women aged sixteen to twenty-five had at least an eighth class pass in 2012, compared to 58 percent of men and 5 percent of women ages thirty-six to forty-five. This occurred even while girls' and SCs' education continued to lag behind that of boys and GCs. At the same time, agriculture has declined. The area being farmed in and around Bemni shrunk by nearly a quarter in the nine years between 2003 and 2012, partly because of sales to the government for the road and other projects, and partly due to a general disillusionment with farming.

In Bemni, the period of "youth" (*jawaani*) is commonly imagined as lasting from puberty until marriage. Until the 1980s, people married in their early to mid-teens, moving directly from "childhood" (*bachpan*) to "adulthood" (*bare*). But increasing education among men and then women led to an increase in the age of marriage. In 2013 the average marriage age was about twenty for women, and twenty-six for men. This shift extended the period of "youth." Many men and some women pursued further education into their late twenties and even thirties, and after getting

married, and villagers also referred to these young people as “youth”. Young people themselves often regarded “youth” as a period in which it was possible to serve the community.

Social men

During fieldwork in Bemni we came across fourteen young men who defined themselves as “social men” and carried out community service in the village and wider surrounding area. We also met at least twenty men from villages close to Bemni who played similar roles. The ‘social men’ whom we interviewed in Bemni were all aged 18-30, had at least a secondary school education, and defined themselves as either unemployed or underemployed; most were in casual employment as construction labourers or managing small family farms. All of these men were General Caste and came from relatively prosperous families in the village – reflecting the fact that only the comparably prosperous can afford to educate their children for long periods. These young men typically received resources – in the form of food and financial assistance from their parents. They regarded themselves as ‘okay’ (theek) from an economic perspective relative to other families in Bemni but as much less wealthy than urban youth whom they encountered in local degree colleges. On several occasions, social men said that they identified as ‘lower middle class’ (see Jeffrey 2010).

Consideration of one of these twelve men, Jitendra Singh, helps to draw out key points related to their social and political action. Jitendra, a Rajput (GC), was about twenty-seven in 2012.¹ He was educated in Bemni and received a BA from a nearby degree college in 2001. He earned the degree on a “private” (correspondence) basis since his parents lacked funds for him to study as a regular student. In 2003 he travelled to western India where he obtained a job in pharmaceutical sales. But two years later his parents asked him to return to the village to look after ill relatives and assist in arranging his sisters’ marriages.

¹ We have used pseudonyms throughout.

After marrying and having children, Jitendra began a Geography degree by correspondence. It is taught in English by he is unable to speak this language. He felt detached from his studies. Jitendra had a keen sense of being “educated unemployed” and of the difficulty of this predicament. Jitendra managed to make ends meet by giving private tutorials, cultivating his small family farm, working on government projects, and collecting caterpillar fungus from the high pastures which is sold to local traders and used as an aphrodisiac in China.

Jitendra spent much of his time engaged in social action. He assisted local people during medical emergencies, often by negotiating with government doctors in the village and local towns. He helped to coordinate responses to specific problems in the village, for example in obtaining water or electricity. He berated the government doctor when he did not come to treat sick villagers, and he campaigned for improvements to the local school.

In October 2012 there was a social emergency in the village that brought Jitendra’s action to the fore. One of his distant relatives, a young woman aged 15, had fled to the jungle with a Dalit young man of a similar age. Jitendra took it into his hands to lead a village response to the event. He worked hard to keep the police out of the village so as to avoid villagers having to pay bribes. He convened a meeting at which it was agreed that the Dalit boy’s family should pay compensation to the young woman’s family. And he played a key role in managing tensions between different families in the village after the incident. Caste shaped Jitendra’s actions - “he was not one of us” he said many times during conversation about the young Dalit man associated with the elopement. Gender norms also influenced Jitendra, who, in line with prevailing patriarchal attitudes, arranged for the young woman involved in the affair to be “sent away to Delhi” after the affair. But Jitendra was successful in preventing conflict in the village, avoiding police involvement, and preventing

violent reprisals, all the while self-consciously demonstrating through his own comportment a vision of how a citizen should respond to such social emergencies.

The suite of activities in which Jitendra engaged and the occasional social efforts he made to resolve conflicts in the village are indicative of the actions of the 14 ‘social men’ (*samajik admi*) whom we interviewed intensively in Bemni and the tens of other young men we met more occasionally in the region. These educated, unemployed youth had the time, motivation, and skills to help local people deal with state officials, particularly with regard to issues surrounding water, food, schooling, and healthcare. They argued that they are constantly ‘busy’ but also contrasted their situation with that of younger youth, embroiled in more intensive schoolwork, and older adults, who depicted as entirely caught up in household management. “Youth gives us a change to change things,” Jitendra once said. “It is the time of opportunity”, another man averred.

Social men had absorbed notions of universal citizenship. India’s school textbooks are full of references to how different figures have served the nation through personal sacrifice and individual efforts at promoting positive change. For example, a common exercise in the English textbooks for schoolchildren in the region is to write a letter to the District Magistrate complaining about the state of the drains in the neighbourhood. At the same time, Bollywood films such as *Yuwa* and *Delhi student politics* film had instilled in young people a desire to emulate Gandhi and perform a vision of citizenship in the face of adversity.

Social men had absorbed a particular vision of how to behave with public officials and in situations in which they negotiated with representatives of the state. They tried - usually in their individual actions rather than as a collective - to be polite to people they met, transparent in their activities, and offer feedback on how their political projects had gone – all qualities that they thought to be lacking in elected politicians. They believed that others, when they saw them acting in this way,

would try to emulate them and that the region (and by extension India) would, ultimately, become less conflict-ridden and self-serving.

Occasionally social men engaged in forms of collective action, for example barracking a government official in his office or working together to improve the government electricity supply to the village. The largest example of such collective action occurred in 2006, when social men organized a campaign to get a road built to Bemni. They arranged for over a hundred villagers to go to a nearby section of jungle and set to work themselves building a road. They borrowed tools from the local town and set up a camp in the forest, complete with music and collective feasts. The men knew that the villagers would not proceed far with the road. But the action gathered media interest— with newspaper headlines of “villagers build their own road”—and helped to shame the local administration into action. For the most part, however, social men worked individually or in small networks, often on particular projects related to the police, health emergencies, or obtaining educational resources for kin. They imagined their action in terms of specific and discrete ‘projects’ (Ortner 2006), in which other youth might be enrolled but that required the animating energy of a single individual.

It is important to stress that social men’s actions were political as well as ethical. They involved constant efforts to negotiate for attention, favours and resources vis-a-vis state representatives and people in positions of authority, akin to Lazar’s discussion of ‘attritional time’ in Ecuador. Indeed, young men often referred to their activities as a form of ‘politics’ (using the English word) or ‘*rajniti*’ (a Hindi word for politics), even while they rejected the label ‘neta’ (another Hindi word for politician), which sometimes implies nefarious and dishonest action.

Social men sometimes complained of being ‘stuck’ in the village, which they regarded as somehow outside the ‘modern’ timespaces of metropolitan India. On some occasions they spoke of their

time in the village as simply ‘timepass’ (Jeffrey 2010) and said that they felt detached from their milieu. Yet social men more commonly argued that they occupied a position on the cusp of a type of regional modernity. They said that people in their pre-teens and early teens were facing challenges that these children’s parents, who were typically aged between 40 and 70, could not understand. The sheer pace of social change in rural Uttarakhand, and especially the marked recent increase in young people’s engagement with secondary education, meant that older villagers had little understanding, for example, of the relative merits of enrolling in a degree on a correspondence basis or as a student who attended on a regular basis. Social men frequently said that they could therefore serve as an ‘intermediary generation’ (*beech ki pitthi*) who had more recent experience of the fields of education, marriage, health, and employment and who were therefore better placed to assist younger youth (see also Naafs and White 2012). They also said that their proximity to childhood meant that they empathized more closely than did other sections of the population with children’s modern hardships.

This prefigurative action was associated with a type of impatience and concern with the present. Social men claimed that the Uttarakhand region had a history of “just getting on with it”, which was reflected in the freedom struggle, Chipko movement, campaign for a separate State, and a folk culture of “*jugaad*” - a word which means improvising shrewdly with available resources in the current moment. On several occasions we were told stories in which a stylized Uttarakhandi man of action outmaneuvered slow-witted colonial officials through speedy action. In several instances it seemed that this impatience was also connected to young men’s experience of time outside of their social and political action. They often felt that they were waiting for work – job applications were laborious and drawn out (see Jeffrey 2010) – social action ‘right now’ provided an outlet for youth frustration.

Social men did not speak of ‘the future’ as a definite horizon and were not to be drawn into discussion of the future, either using the English term ‘future’ or the Hindi word ‘*bhavishya*’. Rather, they spoke mainly about what would happen “from now on” (*age chalkar*). They typically imagined the future as the emergent property of good action performed in the present. “The way I am acting will set me on the right path”, one man said. This was not a religious conception. For example, young men did not talk about the cycle of rebirth associated with Hindu philosophy and how this shaped their thinking about time (*cf* Parry 1994). Rather, they were interested in how the ongoing succession of time – one ‘attritional moment’ to the next (*cf* Lazar 2014) - might precipitate change in the future.

Social men sometimes appeared conflicted on ‘the future’ however. Some spoke of a desire for the world to be different when their own children reached adulthood, and thus stressed the need to have a definite vision of what might be possible 25 years hence in terms of educational facilities and jobs. We observed several conversations in which men debated whether it is useful to think in terms of ‘the future’ as an end point or as the emergent property of present actions.

Parents sometimes complained about the influence exercised by social men. There were occasional conflicts over whether young men or older villagers should assume primary responsibility for negotiating with state authorities, such as the police force. But on the whole older Bemni residents recognized ‘social men’ as people with knowledge (*gyan*) information (*janikaari*) valuable for their children. They considered social men as ‘exemplary individuals’ and imagined that they would grow in power in the future.

Social men’s action and reflections must be read in context. A generalized dissatisfaction with life among young men in their twenties and early thirties in rural Uttarakhand was fuelling violent crime, alcoholism, poaching, and the emergence among the youth generation of a wide variety of

‘contractors’ and ‘dealers’ (*dalaal*) who embezzled development monies (see Jeffrey 2010). Rising frustration among youth is likely to swell the ranks of such men, possibly leading to social conflict within the youth population between those engaged predominantly in the type of civic action performed by social men. In addition, social men’s activities had a strong class and caste component. Poorer GC men and Dalits sometimes bemoaned their inability to obtain a prolonged education and acquire the social networking resources possessed by social men. “We would like to be social men”, one Dalit young man pointed out, “But we do not have the back support [kinship ties and money].” Social men’s activity was to a large extent a privilege of their rural class position. In addition, young male social actors in Bemni engaged in practices that had the general effect of reproducing inequalities based upon caste, class, and gender. Yet, for all these qualifications, the rise of a generation of self-styled social activists and generational intermediaries was having a generally positive effect on social development in Bemni.

Now for young women

Many educated young women in Bemni were also engaging in energetic social action at the everyday level which had marked prefigurative characteristics. There were ten young women in Bemni, and many more in the surrounding villages, who typically came from relatively wealthy families and tried to facilitate gender empowerment among their peers. The example of Santushti is instructive. Santushti comes from one of the wealthiest GC families in Bemni. Her father formerly held several positions within sub-district level politics, and she was one of the first young women in the village to be educated. Santushti was married in 2012, and had a one-year-old son in 2014. She divided her time between looking after her son and working in the local government nursery. She considered herself “unemployed” in certain respects but hoped that she might obtain a more secure and better-paid position in the government nursery system.

Santushti acted as a motivator in Bemni, and she commonly used the term ‘motivate’ to describe her work. She would tour the village talking to GC and SC young women and assisting them with decisions about education, healthcare and social life more broadly. Santushti also tried to instill confidence (*‘himmat’* or *‘hosla’* in Hindi).

A sense of Santushti’s prefigurative social action can be gleaned from a conversation November 2013. Santushti was sitting in a Dalit woman’s courtyard in Bemni. She had been trying to persuade her host, Kamla Devi, to stand for election as the next village leader, the Pradhan. The position had been reserved for a woman, and Kamla Devi was an obvious choice. But Kamla Devi was reluctant.

“How could I possibly do the work of pradhan?” Kamla asked. “How could I do that and look after my children, and work the land? Besides, *you* might be able to talk in public,” Kamla continued, looking at Santushti, “But I’ll never manage that.”

“No!” beamed Santushti, hands shooting up, and waving frantically. “That’s not a problem at all. Don’t you remember Sundari Devi, from the village down the valley? That’s what she said when she was chosen as pradhan. She was illiterate, you know. At the beginning she was so fearful.”

“Even so....” Kamla Devi replied.

“Did you ever hear her speak?” Santushti went on. “Sundari came to a nursery school meeting once, and I was so impressed. She really inspired me to speak. Later, when I was in a group meeting, I tried it out. I was sitting there, surrounded by other young women. The leader had asked us for opinions but we all just sat, looking around, hoping nobody would catch our eyes.

Eventually, I thought, ‘This is stupid...someone has to say something’. So, even though it was the last thing I wanted, I forced myself to talk. [...] That’s when I realized I could do it.”

Santushti commented later, “That was just part of my social work. Look, if we are going to change anything around here, you have to show the way. Besides, I’m educated. People expect me to help.”

Young women faced greater obstacles to undertaking social action than did men. They were not expected to spend long periods in public areas nor to enter into negotiations with government officials in the nearby town. But there were six high school or university educated young women such as Santushti in Bemni who had developed a strong sense of their own ability to raise problems and address social “projects” in spheres of everyday life, and at least a further ten women in three nearby villages who performed similar roles (*cf* Ortner 2006). They had begun to act as motivators for other women, particular in relation to education, health (including family planning), and the question of “raising one’s voice”. Other young people in the village saw these young women as role models.

Young women stressed the need to act in the here and now. They said that politicians could not be trusted to deliver on promises and expressed their disinterest in the broader idea of “development” (*vikaas*). In addition, unmarried young women knew that, after marriage, it might be impossible to continue as social activists.

The past was often a negative point of reference for young women involved in social action in Bemni. They felt that they had to escape the strictures of gender norms that were strong in times gone by. They looked back at their mothers’ lives and wanted their own to be somewhat different. As in Jitendra’s case, the future for young women in Santushti was not a tangible landscape or

point of time, five, ten or fifteen years hence. It was instead imagined as the emergent product of their ongoing efforts. This sensibility was closely linked to the idea that the “the positive effects of education” are slowly diffusing across the social landscape, “like the light that escapes through a chink in the door.”

Now on the plains

On the plains of Western UP, I [first author] encountered forms of youth social action that were strikingly similar in several key respects to those we observed among social men and educated young women in Bemni. Meerut is a city of one million people in Western UP. Just outside India’s National Capital Region, it developed rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s as a centre for private health care and private education. The upsurge in educational institutions, in particular, reflected the bulge in the population of youth in UP in the 2000s and changing aspirations. In the 1980s, households belonging to Hindu middle castes began investing more heavily in the education of their children, particularly sons. Wealthy higher caste farmers, especially members of the Jat caste, saw higher education as providing their sons with a path into well-paid government jobs. More recently, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), established in 1984, has promoted the cause of Dalits (ex-“untouchables”), who are also now participating in higher education in increasing numbers.

Just as the number of young people attending university was increasing, there was a significant decrease in per capita investment in public sector education (Thorat 2011). The provision and quality of teaching aids and equipment, catering facilities, and basic amenities, began to decline in many colleges. There was also a scarcity of government employment. The Jats and upwardly-mobile Dalits lacked the credentials and social contacts necessary to attain private jobs in Delhi, and competition for work was extremely intense even within the SC reserved quota for jobs.

I conducted research with youth in Meerut in 2004 and 2005 and briefly again in 2010 and 2012, interviewing 76 men and 32 young women belonging to higher caste, Jat and Dalit backgrounds who were studying in either Meerut college or Chaudhry Charan Singh University in Meerut and who defined themselves as “educated unemployed”. This research considered a wide range of forms of politics, but the themes of engaging in everyday politics, prefiguring the future, and ‘seizing the moment’ emerged powerfully in this research. There were subtle differences in the manner in which young people engaged in quotidian politics as compared to those in Bemni. But there were remarkable parallels between the activities of Bemni youth social actors and those performing similar roles in Meerut a few years earlier. Two analytic sets of students in Meerut were especially involved in everyday prefigurative politics: Dalit young men espousing the cause of ex-untouchables and higher caste (usually Brahmin) young women from relatively wealthy urban, upper middle class families.

Embodying caste power

Rakesh was 28 in 2005 and worked as a Political Science student at Meerut University. I first met him in his room on the first floor of a hostel in the centre of the university. He dressed smartly and was scrupulously polite. Rakesh’s political energy was written onto walls of his hostel room: newspaper articles chronicling his efforts and achievements were pasted above his bed, and a large metal cupboard contained reams of correspondence between Rakesh and various local authorities.

Rakesh had a deep mistrust of politicians, of representatives of the state, and of “politics” (*rajniti*) itself. He said that government officials in Meerut and his home village are routinely grasping and vicious. The BSP constantly made promises, but they never come true. The only strategy in this

context was to do something one self. “I have learnt from bitter experience that you cannot rely on politicians’ promises. You simply have to do your own work (*kaam karna hai*)”.

In October 2014, I was talking to Rakesh over ginger tea about his failure to find a government job. Rakesh suddenly brightened during the conversation and said:

I absolutely refused to accept defeat. I volunteered to work in a government office as a clerk. This gave me experience in how government offices work, for example when and how bribes have to be paid, who has influence, and how papers travel within offices. I got a sense of how corruption works within the educational bureaucracy in Meerut, university offices, police stations, and the law courts.

The apprenticeship did not lead to a permanent job but it provided Rakesh with the essential experience, alongside his formal education, to work as a self-styled “activist” (a term that youth in Bemni avoided).

Rakesh participated in some forms of politics that were not prefigurative. He organized roadblocks on campus on the issue of reservations for SCs and Scheduled Tribes (STs). He constantly berated the Vice-Chancellor over the issue of scholarships for Dalits and the filling of university posts reserved for SCs. Yet much of Rakesh’s activity was more covert and occurred through trying to model future social relations. He worked in a variety of what he termed “fields” (using the English word): the field of getting admission and scholarships in higher education, the field of investigating atrocities against Dalits, and the field of assisting with health issues, in particular. Within these fields, Rakesh cultivated an everyday style in which he treated everyone with respect and avoided talking badly of anyone. He worked to build productive relationships with particular government officials, being sure not to bribe them or exert influence outside formal, legal rules. Rakesh

maintained that his own bodily comportment and habits, interacting with the opportunities afforded by social 'fields', conjures up openings to change the system. On one occasion Rakesh said: "Today I was opposite a really bad policeman. I just kept talking courteously. I refused to be any different. Eventually he came round to my way of talking himself."

There were 15 Dalit activists in Meerut whose strategies mirrored closely those of Rakesh and in 2004-2005 I met a further 20 Dalit activists from outside Meerut whose work also seemed striking similar. These activists engaged heavily in prefigurative politics in the sense that, like youth social actors in Bemni they channeled energy into modeling in the present their vision of society should be organized henceforward and in that they saw this project as simultaneously ethical and political.

Dalit activists work sometimes bore fruit. For example, they ensured that positions formally reserved for SCs and STs were filled at Meerut University. Rakesh had a corrupt Vice-Chancellor removed from Meerut University. In these cases Dalit activists typically combined everyday prefigurative action within direct petitioning and advocacy work. But Dalit activists typically operated alone rather than as a group, and young men like Rakesh were frequently frustrated. "It's an exhausting business", Rakesh confided in 2005, "and one that I may not be able to continue for very long". Rakesh also pointed out that he had been unsuccessful in developing a collective sense among Dalits of how to counter caste oppression and injustice. He referred to an 'ego problem' among Dalit activists whereby people concentrated on developing their own profile rather than sharing information. He also said that Dalits are cynical about named groups of any type. "We need better institutionalization," he claimed, "But we have become suspicious of all such groups and parties".

The temporalities of Dalit activists also paralleled those of young people in Bemni in three key respects. First, they drew self-consciously on past visions of how to practice politics. Dalits

occasionally referred to inspirational figures from India's past, mainly low caste male heroes such as Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram, a former leader of the BSP. Second, Dalit politicians eschewed fixed political horizons. They claimed that future (*bhavishya*) meant little. "We need instead to think about what is going to happen 'from now on' (*age chalkar*)," as Rakesh put it.

Third, Dalit activists said that they should act 'now', rather than waiting for other political agencies, such as politicians and NGOs, to improve their situation. As in Bemni, this generalized impatience among Dalit youth activists reflected their sense of being in a distinct life stage of 'youth' in which it is possible to effect change. But in the case of Dalits in Meerut, this impulse to act in the moment had a further caste and class element. Dalit students' parents were not as well off as were those of GC young men in Bemni. Dalits had a stronger sense that they had a short 'window of opportunity', as several men put it themselves, in which they could pursue their vision of good citizenship and change-oriented behavior. Indeed, in many cases Dalit activists had to abandon their community politicking in the face of household responsibilities or the pressing need to earn cash. For example, when I returned to Meerut in 2010, Rakesh said that he had been under pressure from his wife's parents to earn money. He now sat on the board of a private higher educational institution that was responsible for providing poor-quality education to students whose parents had only a dim knowledge of higher education. Rakesh said that the college itself is a type of "cheating", but that he has to make money somehow. He also pointed out that—even while representing a commercialized higher educational market through his formal role—he continues to try to protest against the privatization of higher education and associated corruption behind the scenes. Rakesh's move from activist to participant in educational corruption is indicative of a wider shift among many Dalit activists between 2003/04 and 2010 (see also Jeffrey and Young 2012).

Middle class young women

There was also a set of young women from relatively prosperous, middle class backgrounds in Meerut who had a substantial influence over youth politics in the region and a more diffuse impact on the functioning of local fields of education, health, work, and infrastructure. For example, Hema was in her early twenties, unmarried and studying for a law degree in Meerut in 2004. She came from a fairly wealthy Brahmin family that had moved from Delhi to Meerut in part for Hema's education. Like many Dalit social activists, she had a keen sense of various "fields of practice" relevant to social life in the city and she was determined to understand how these operated and how she might intervene within them. She said that there is no use waiting for the situation to improve: you have to do things yourself to make things better.

I visited Hema on one occasion in her large house in the army cantonment area of Meerut. She had come to the door to meet me and, checking that no one was watching, she slid the iron door shut and led me through a forest of pot plants (gardening was one of her hobbies). Hema was in a philosophical mood and seemed to want to talk about the importance of action. "When you walked into my house to see me," she said. "You walked past some stray dog puppies." Hema went to fetch some water. "You just walked past them," she continued in a tone of admonishment. "I would have picked up one of those puppies if I'd seen them. I mean literally, I would have picked one up. I don't think you know this but on my top floor I already have fifteen stray puppies."

Hema said that in her daily experience of social fields mired by corruption it was often important to "take a stand" and engage in "projects". On one occasion a young man exposed himself to Hema through a window in a college library. She responded by launching a concerted campaign against the culture of aggressive masculinity that she felt pervaded many campuses in the city. Hema was instrumental some months later in arranging for partitions to be placed within city buses transporting young women to university such that they were relatively safe from harassment.

On another occasion, Hema responded to a demand to pay a bogus additional charge for admission to a degree in Meerut College by talking to the Principal, donors to the college, and a member of the management board; she eventually compelled the college to make concessions. On yet another occasion, Hema launched a successful campaign against a citywide move to eliminate stray dogs on health grounds.

As Hema grew in confidence and became more involved in local legal work, the scale of her projects increased. In 2007, when I returned to Meerut, Hema described work she had done for a poor woman whom she knew.

I was working on a land dispute case and had to go to see the *patwari* [revenue official]. He kept telling me to come back the next day. Eventually I went with the aggrieved woman and she paid the patwari a bribe of Rs. 500 to get the work done. I was actually really annoyed that she had paid the bribe. The patwari told us to come back at 5pm. When I went back everything was shut up. I managed to find the patwari and he told me to come back in half an hour. He then told me to come back tomorrow. I smelt alcohol. I went to the Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) and told him what had happened. The SSP told me he'd need corporeal evidence to catch the patwari 'How on earth will I get that?' I asked him. The SSP suggested a newspaper sting operation. Then the SSP accused me of raising the complaint solely to advance my career. [Hema laughed loudly] I told the SSP that if I wanted to advance my career I would have paid the patwari Rs. 1000 and got the work done straight away. The SSP laughed and he seemed to come round to my way of thinking. He told another police officer to take action and the patwari was transferred.

Hema said that her success in such cases was attributable to her sense of humour, forthright manner, command of English, and determination to "seize the day".

Hema's activities were indicative of those of the ten other politically active young women that I [first author] interviewed in Meerut. Like Hema, these women defined their actions in opposition to official or formal politics. They spoke hotly of rapidly increasing corruption in the region. Many young women saw themselves as role models and said that they were trying to lead by example. They came from relatively wealthy backgrounds and all but two spoke reasonably good English, unlike the other youth we interviewed in western UP and Uttarakhand.

On several occasions middle class young women in Meerut were able to effect change in the city, for example persuading senior officials to enforce laws related to gender equality. But they said that they had been unable to develop a sense of collective strength. One of Hema's friends noted that young women had a type of 'information network' wherein they shared stories of their work, but no institutional home or identity. She said that the cast of young women involved in such social action changes too quickly, as people cycle in and out of college.

Young women frequently said that their sex sometimes acted as a type of "resource". They were less tainted by a public culture in which the young male body is imagined as a social danger. But gendered norms around propriety made it difficult for young women to engage in social action. The overtly masculine culture of student union politicians deepened these problems still further. In addition, young women in Meerut had a strong sense that they might be able to engage in social action during their late teens and early twenties but that, after marriage, such opportunities would disappear. This sense of youth as a disappearing window of opportunity, stronger among women than men, lent a particular logic to young women concentrating on 'now'.

A particular vision of historical change informed the politics of middle class young women studying in Meerut. They used the contrast between allegedly well-functioning public institutions in

the past and a present corrupt institutional landscape as a basis for critique. They often said that educational institutions had declined and that the figure of the honest District Magistrate had disappeared. Moreover, and like other social actors in Bemni and Meerut, these young women operated with an emergent vision of the future. They said that their present actions would and slowly come to change wider society.

Conclusions

Nietzsche (1996: 627) has a wonderful passage in his philosophical work in which he ponders on how some people can derive so much feature and meaning from simple daily activity while others travel the world disassociated from their surroundings, “bobbling like a floating cork”. What tied together the young people we have discussed was their fierce attempt to channel their energy into the everyday business of trying to fix the localities in which they lived. They had a strong sense of the spheres—or ‘fields’—in which they need to effect change and of the rhythm of these fields and of precisely how they might intervene successfully within them. They were never going to be Nietzsche’s floating corks.

Analysis of youth action serves as a counterpoint to negative depictions of youth in scholarly arenas and in the media. Youth live in the teeth of intense contradictions. They are increasingly exposed to models of prosperous middle class life and ideas of universal citizenship within school even while the grounds for obtaining these coveted social goods became more uncertain. Rather than engaging in actions that are fanciful and quixotic, as the work of Marx and Engels (1978) and Hall (1904) might prime us to expect, a substantial portion of young people in north India—as in other parts of India (see for example Krishna 2012) and the world (e.g. Mains 2010)—are frequently highly enterprising students of local political opportunities.

In a study reminiscent of our own, Appadurai (2013) has described systematic processes of “precedent setting” among NGO activists in Mumbai, who closely archived their everyday prefigurative activity as a basis for making future claims on the state. Leach and Haunss (2012: 230) have written of the similar importance of “scenes” within social movements, which serve as “a type of living archive that helps preserve movement identity.” In Bemni and Meerut there was no coordinated process of recording political action, either on paper or via “scenes”. But young people did effect change at the local level, subtly altering local fields related to education, health, infrastructure, and work. Their activities, they said, were “slow burn”. They tried to change things through a type of capillary action, gently reorienting practices and people away from the worst types of fraud and corruption and towards more transparent and equitable outcomes. Contrary to Lipset and Altbach (1969), who imagined the expressive and strategic as in conflict, symbolic action has considerable power within fields. Our analysis thus points to the potentially important role of non-protest forms of visionary organizing which occur outside the institutional spheres associated with “civil society” as it is usually defined.

Young people in north India hoped that the ‘now’ that they were performing will somehow be generalized in the near or more distant future (*cf* Guyer 2007). But they did so usually without any keen sense of when that future might arise. Appadurai (2013: 191) argues that the empowerment of the poor requires that they develop what he terms a “capacity to aspire”: a type of navigational ability in which people plot courses with respect to a “definite horizon of hopes and wants”. Our analysis suggests that those marginalized within society have precisely this navigational capacity, but conceptualize change as the cumulative precipitate of action in the present rather than a horizon event.

There are nevertheless difficulties associated with recuperating the youth politics we have described from old Marxist or civil society critiques of their practices as insubstantial. Young

people's activities are poorly institutionalized for at least four connected reasons. First, young people tended to negotiate with state officials and seek redress in response to specific, sometimes family-centred difficulties, for example where a child was refused entry to school or a friend is at risk of police arrest. Second, the individualistic nature of the politics we have described also reflects the extent to which young people were themselves valuing notions of individual agency circulating in the media, such as in Bollywood films. Third, prefigurative politics may inhibit long-term collective action because it depends upon imagining in full form a specific vision of how society should be organized. Achieving consent in such circumstances is likely to be difficult, as Fominaya has also observed in her work on the World Justice Movement. Fourth, social inequalities inhibit collective action. The actions of the north Indian youth actors reflected the particular gender, caste and class location of its proponents. Young men in Bemni operated with a rather conservative vision of gender. Dalits in Meerut did not involve Muslims in his work. Upper middle class young women in Meerut largely limited themselves to middle class issues. Schaffzin (2012) explains the apparent failure of the Occupy movement through reference to its inability to truly model in miniature society as a whole, with minority groups noticeably under-represented. The same critique can be applied to everyday prefigurative action in north India. We encountered very few poor Dalit young women involved in everyday prefigurative politics in Bemni and western UP. Moreover, prefigurative politics often devolves back into more self-interested action.

There are similarities between the activities of young people working in provincial north India and those engaged in much larger-scale, organized oppositional politics such as the Occupy Movement in the US. In the case of the politics we have described and the prefigurative action of youth involved for example in Occupy, participants did not engage closely with party politics, were intensely concerned about the corruption of various agencies of the state, focused their energy into working on everyday issues 'in the now', and concentrated especially on how to perform within everyday space and the body. In the case of both global youth movements and north Indian

activists, the past was a critical resource. Schneider (2012) has traced Occupy activists' concern with 'now' to traditions of American Protestantism that encouraged a focus on present-day action. In the north Indian case described here young people had widely varying models. For social men in Bemni, struggles for a separate Uttarakhandi State were an inspiration; for young women in Bemni, the negative image of the former subjugation of women was important; for Dalit activists in Meerut, it was the stories of Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram; and for middle class young women in Meerut, a vision of a relatively uncorrupted former set of public institutions was paramount.

There are also differences between the action we have described and other examples of youth prefigurative politics. Young people's prefigurative action in north India has not been institutionalized and remains rather fractured as a result.

There were also two significant differences between the temporalities of young men's action in Bemni and those of young people involved in many of the recent prefigurative forms of youth politics that have emerged since 2010. First, many north Indian youth activists, to a greater extent than Occupy activists described for example in Schneider's (2012) work, complained about their inability to sustain social action. Women complained that they would need to marry, for example, and Dalits worried about running out of funds. For these young people prefigurative politics was a fragile achievement and – in the case of Dalits - constantly threatening to tip over into more 'traditional' forms of self-interested patronage politics.

Second, whereas in the case of the Occupy Movement (Chomsky 2010) or World Social Forum (Fominaya 2012) activists tended to imagine 'now' as distinctive moment or 'epochal event' (Sewell and McAdam 200), young people in Bemni and Meerut referred more commonly to 'now' as the ongoing passage of time. They stressed the transformative power of an unfolding present routed through and rooted in everyday life. This was similar in key respects to what Lazar described as

protesters preoccupation with ‘attritional time’ in a South American context. But young people in India also had a strong sense that the everyday grind of politicking would lead to a better future, understood as what happens “from now on” (*age chalkar*).

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