

Kicking Away the Ladder Student Politics and the Making of an Indian Middle Class*

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In 1996 I was sitting with a young man called Sonu¹ in a beer hall in Meerut City, Uttar Pradesh (UP). Sonu came from a prominent family belonging to the middle ranking Jat caste. Holding a BA degree, Sonu was unemployed and working on the fringes of student politics in Meerut. Mid-way through our conversation about the power of the Jats in western UP, Sonu told me: “If you are with me in Meerut and you see a policeman you don’t like, you can just punch him in the face. You will come to no harm.” (c.f. Jeffrey, 2000). Sonu believed that his local power was so absolute that no policeman would be able to question his actions or those of a friend. This was no idle boast. Wealthy Jat men such as Sonu were able to exert a profound influence over the local state in north India in the mid-1990s. UP politics changed in the ten years from 1995 onwards. Dalits (ex-untouchables) gained access to power and had some success in demanding accountability from government officials. By the early 2000s, scholars in Delhi and abroad have even begun to write of a “Dalit Revolution” in UP. But when I returned to Meerut in 2004, Sonu remained confident of his control over the local state, indeed he had become a major political fixer in Meerut.

Since the mid-1960s a powerful and confident rural middle class has emerged in western UP that is exerting increasing influence over the state. At the same time, the rise of Dalit politics poses a major threat to the accumulative practices of this stratum of western UP society. Drawing upon seven months of fieldwork conducted in 2004–2005, this paper discusses the social, symbolic and spatial strategies that an emergent middle class have used to defend their power, with particular reference to wealthy, middle

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¹ All names are pseudonyms.

caste student politicians in the north Indian city of Meerut. I show that middle caste politicians are well equipped to meet the challenge posed by Dalits in western UP and use this argument to argue for closer focus on cultural and spatial aspects of class competition.²

The next section of the paper introduces literature on the making of a rural middle class and discusses the value of Bourdieu's work for theorizing this important section of Indian society. I then provide an introduction to the political economy of UP and my research. The next two sections form the core of the paper and consider dominant student politics and then spaces of Dalit resistance and Jat and Gujar counter-resistance. In the conclusion, I use the Meerut material to argue for the value of an organizationally and culturally sensitive political economy approach to the study of class and space.

Theorizing India's Rich Farmers

One of the most distinctive features of neoliberal transformation in post-colonial settings has been the increasing economic and political role played by classes located in an ambivalent position between capital and labor. Social strata roughly equivalent to Marx's (1967: 91) 'petit-bourgeoisie' or 'middle classes' have often become key economic actors, social animators and political entrepreneurs in the global south. A characteristic aspect of these middle classes is their heterogeneity. Middle classes in poorer countries often include downwardly mobile elites created through colonialism (e.g. Scheper-Hughes, 1992), class fractions struggling to protect their access to state largesse in the face of the down-sizing of the state (e.g. Harriss-White, 2003) and entrepreneurs who have taken advantage of nation-building projects, economic restructuring and projects of international development to separate themselves from the poor (e.g. Berry, 1985; Mawdsley, 2004; Robison and Goodman, 1996; Watts, 2004).

India might be considered a paradigmatic case of how middle classes in post-colonial contexts are reshaping political life. The much vaunted emergence of Information Technology (IT) allied to the rapid economic growth rate in India since the mid-1990s has apparently raised increasing

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numbers of Indians into the middle class. While there is disagreement about the size of the Indian middle class – and estimates vary from 50 million to 300 million (see Deshpande, 2003; Nijman, 2006) – there is a consensus that a large prosperous stratum now exists in India that does not herald from traditional elites but which exerts a profound influence over the politics, culture, and social organization of the country (Varma, 1998; Fernandes, 2006). At the same time, this collection of class fractions faces constant political pressure from politically mobile subaltern groups, especially lower castes (Jaffrelot, 2003), and a reactionary bourgeoisie (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000).

Fernandes and Heller (2006) identify three tiers within the Indian middle classes: first, senior professionals and higher bureaucrats; second, rich farmers and the urban petit bourgeoisie; and third, poorly paid members of the salariat, such as nurses, clerks, and teachers. This paper focuses on the relatively neglected ‘intermediate stratum’ of the middle class, especially young men belonging to rich farming families. I use ‘rich farmers’ to refer to those who own the means of production, hire in labor for most agricultural tasks, and typically possess over 1.5 hectares of land (c.f. Patnaik, 1976). Since Independence, rich farmers across large parts of India have acquired the trappings of middle class life, including consumer goods, large homes, private education, and urban employment (e.g. Upadhyaya, 1988; Rutten, 1995; Jeffrey, 2001). Indeed, rich farmers often draw upon non-farm incomes to such an extent that the distinction made between Fernandes and Heller (2006) between rich farmers and low-ranking salaried workers has often collapsed in practice.

The rise of rich farmers is often traced to changes in the political economy of India in the mid-1960s. In 1964 the Indian Government shifted the direction of development planning from a model of industrial growth towards a more committed drive to improve agricultural production. C. Subramaniam’s appointment as India’s Food and Agriculture Minister in 1964, advice from the World Bank, changing US aid policies, and concerns over a communist threat fomenting in the Indian countryside, conspired to effect a move away from the Nehruvian policy of low food prices and institutional reform. The Indian state focused instead on creating incentive prices for producers through the establishment of an Agricultural Prices Commission and the Food Corporation of India in January 1965. This intervention in the food-grain market was harnessed to a drive towards agricultural production increases, principally through encouraging the application of high yielding varieties of grain, fertilizers, pesticides, and improved irrigation.

Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, rich farmers in India, particularly those in the fertile western and northern parts of the country, intensified their farming practices through purchasing agricultural machinery,

using subsidized fertilizers, pesticides, and insecticides on their land, and expanding their use of hired-in labor (Rutten, 1995; Lerche, 1999). At the same time, and often concerned by the subdivision of land, rich farmers diversified out of agriculture by seeking government employment for their sons (Jeffrey, 2001; Harriss-White, 2003) entering business (Rutten, 1995) and using their influence over government bureaucracies to acquire rental incomes from the local state (Jeffrey, 2002; Harriss-White, 2003). These non-farm strategies were linked to a broader process of social mobility wherein rich farmers removed family members from direct cultivation of the soil, offered large dowries at the time of their daughters' marriages, limited the size of their families, and invested in private, often English-medium, education (e.g. Breman, 1985; Upadhyaya, 1988; Jeffery and Jeffery, 1997; Gidwani, 2001). An effort to raise the collective position of the caste within the caste hierarchy – a process that Srinivas (1989) termed 'sanskritization' – often animated these accumulative strategies (e.g. Breman, 1985). But rich farmers were most centrally preoccupied with processes of *individual* household mobility (Upadhyaya, 1988).

The mid-1960s also witnessed a rapid improvement in the visibility and coherence of rich farmers as a political bloc. The shift in government policy in the mid-1960s, combined with the rise of political parties representing agricultural groups, provided a platform for the political consolidation of rich farmers, who often forged links with poorer strata (Duncan, 1997; Hasan, 1998). In addition to influencing state policy, rich farmers became involved in agrarian movements in the late 1980s and early 1990s, often aimed at protecting government agricultural subsidies (Brass, 1995).

Economic liberalization since the early 1990s has posed threats to the accumulation strategies of rich farmers. Between 1947 and the mid-1980s, India's approach to macroeconomic planning combined a leading role for the private sector in economic decision-making with state intervention formally aimed at accelerating growth and redistributing social opportunities (Chandrasekhar and Ghosh, 2002). In the face of a growing fiscal crisis, however, and under pressure from multilateral lenders, the Indian state embarked on a series of economic reforms beginning in the mid-1980s and intensifying in the early 1990s. Rich farmers continued to receive large subsidies on power, water and fertilizers and benefit from high government purchasing prices for key crops during the 1990s (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000: 157). But the slowdown in the creation of government jobs partially undermined their diversification strategies. Moreover, the state's partial withdrawal from the regulation of markets threatened to limit the ability of rich farmers to extract money from the local state (Harriss-White, 2003: 60f).

Rich farmers also faced new political threats from the late 1980s onwards. The first threat emanated from the expansion of reservations in education and employment for lower castes. In the 1930s, the British created lists of formerly Untouchable castes deemed eligible for special government assistance, the 'Scheduled Castes' (SCs). The Indian Constitution offered the SCs legal equality and reserved places in public-sector employment, educational institutions, and government representative bodies (Béteille, 1992). After Indian Independence the Government investigated possibilities for extending reservations to so-called Other Backward Classes (OBCs): castes 'above' SCs in the Indian caste hierarchy but nevertheless identified as socially and economically deprived. This possibility was revived in the late 1970s when the ruling Janata Party established a commission, under the chairmanship of B.P. Mandal, to explore strategies for improving the condition of OBCs. The Mandal Commission's report, published in 1980, set out a program for reserving seats in educational institutions and government bureaucracies for OBCs. The Report was set aside for nearly ten years, but the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, acted on its recommendations in August 1990 (Dirks, 2003: 284–285). Because large sections of the emerging rural middle classes were not categorized as OBCs, the implementation of the Mandal Report reduced the political cohesiveness of a prosperous rural political bloc (Duncan, 1997), and intensified social pressures operating on non-OBCs seeking government employment.

A second challenge to the power of rural middle classes came from Dalits (Dalit means 'broken and oppressed' in Hindi). From the early 1980s onwards, a range of political parties putatively representing Dalit castes strengthened their performance in State Assembly elections in several states of India. By the late 1990s, low caste political entrepreneurs had emerged across large parts of rural India who were seeking to challenge the dominance of rich farmers through capturing state power (Parry, 1999; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2005).

Recent scholarly research, much of it on the urban rich, suggests that middle classes have responded to the threats posed by economic liberalization and the rise of lower castes through deepening their investment in social networks, especially attempts to develop relationships of cooperation with local state officials. Reflecting the continued presence of the state within markets, Indian middle classes, including rich farmers, have often found new opportunities to establish links with government representatives and appropriate state resources (Harriss-White, 2003). Rich farmers have not always used an urban 'new middle class' as a role model in seeking social mobility. For example, the Jats in northern India have often emphasized a type of rural pride and masculine strength that does not have a close

analogue in accounts of the urban middle class (see Jeffrey, 2000). But middle class accumulation strategies in the wake of economic reform often converge around attempts to establish cultural distinction through purchasing urban consumer goods (Upadhyaya, 1988; Chari, 2004), arranging marriages according to cultural considerations (Jeffrey, 2001), developing social links in the urban upper middle class (Rutten, 1995), and intensifying their search for English-medium education for their children (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2005; Fernandes and Heller, 2006).

The strategies of urban and rural middle classes have also coalesced around attempts to reshape public space to reflect their own interests. The urban upper middle classes have been in the vanguard of this movement which has included the establishment of civic associations representing middle class attitudes towards the urban environment (Harriss, 2006), the appropriation of global symbols to glorify urban middle class lifestyles (Fernandes, 2006), and participation in Hindu nationalist social organizations which often gave expression to middle class frustrations, while also offering middle classes new forms of cultural distinction based on a vision of religious nationalism (Fernandes and Heller, 2006: 507; c.f. Hansen, 1996). These strategies suggest something of a shift among the middle classes away from competitive electoral politics – which some sections of the middle class have come to imagine as “dirty” (Harriss, 2006) – towards associational and symbolic forms of political engagement.

Studies of the Indian middle class in the 1990s and 2000s therefore appear to demand a theory of class formation that foregrounds the relationship between middle classes and poorer sections of society, places central emphasis on social and cultural dimensions of power, and attends to the spatial representation of dominance. As I have argued elsewhere (Jeffrey, 2001; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2008), the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu provides a valuable point of entry in understanding Indian class and caste dynamics. In seeking to explain the durability of middle class power, Bourdieu (1986) emphasized the capacity of richer sections of society to defend and deepen their power through not only accumulating money and assets (economic capital) but also by investing in social capital: social bonds useful in the efforts of individual households or class fractions to acquire money, power or status. In addition, Bourdieu stressed the importance for middle class power of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986): a range of goods, titles and forms of behaviour that confer distinction in social situations, and which includes academic qualifications (institutionalized cultural capital), a person’s comportment (embodied cultural capital) and material possessions (objectified cultural capital). Bourdieu was especially interested in the quotidian practices through which class advantage is communicated and reinforced, and stressed

in particular the manner in which power is contained within the ‘habitus’: internalized orientations to action inscribed in people’s dispositions, reflexes and tastes. Bourdieu viewed society as comprised of distinct fields of social competition – or ‘gaming spaces’ – in which people with higher volumes of economic, social and cultural capital and with a habitus more attuned to possibilities for gain tend to out-manoeuvre poorer groups.

Bourdieu’s theoretical schema is valuable in drawing attention to the durability of class power in many geographical settings, the multi-dimensionality of dominance, and the importance of understanding class relationally (c.f. Savage and Butler, 1992). In addition, Bourdieu’s emphasis on cultural capital, social networks, and fields of social competition highlights how class dominance is linked to control over physical and representational space. But in his emphasis on class reproduction, Bourdieu rather suggests that poorer sections of society are incapable of effecting change or engaging in critique (Cloke *et al.*, 1995; Crang, 1997). Bourdieu’s work therefore needs to be set alongside the emphasis of other scholars on the capacity of marginalized groups to engage in resistance (Gramsci, 1971; Willis, 1982; Hall, 1985). Willis (1982) pays particular attention to how working class young people sometimes challenge class structures through forms of cultural production: active and creative practices shaped by broader structures and available symbolic resources. The notion of cultural production also implies that middle class youth may act in ways that do not straightforwardly reproduce the status quo (c.f. Bennett and Kahn-Harris, 2004).

The Political Economy of Uttar Pradesh

UP is the most populous state in India; it contained 166 million people in 2000 (ORG, 2001). On most indices of development UP ranks as among the two or three most impoverished states in India (Drèze and Gazdar, 1997; World Bank, 2002). The liberalization of the Indian economy from the mid-1980s onwards has further marginalized UP in comparison with most other Indian states, as evident in the sphere of employment generation (Chandrashekar and Ghosh, 2002). Outside metropolitan areas, economic reforms have reduced opportunities for government employment, historically an important source of salaried work. Liberalization has often failed to generate private sector jobs (Sen, 1997) and reduced the availability of rural credit and therefore possibilities for entrepreneurialism (Chandrashekar and Ghosh, 2002).

In the social arena, liberalization has eroded the public provision of basic welfare, a point which emerges especially clearly in the case of education (see Jeffrey *et al.* 2005; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2008). UP literacy rates are be-

low national levels; in 2001, 70 percent of males and 43 percent of females over the age of seven were literate in UP compared to nation-wide figures of 76 per cent and 54 per cent (ORG, 2001). Until the early 1990s, the state was expanding its financial support for government schooling. Since that time, neo-liberal economic reforms have undermined government educational provision (Mooij and Dev, 2002). With the exception of a small number of elite state colleges, government educational institutions usually lack teaching aids and equipment, catering facilities, and basic amenities (Kingdon and Muzammil, 2003; Jeffrey *et al.*, 2005), and a host of non-state schools and colleges have entered the educational to fill this institutional vacuum (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2005).

This pattern of state neglect reflects the entrenched nature of caste and class inequalities in UP (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2003). UP's population may be roughly divided into three social blocs (Jeffrey *et al.*, 2008). Upper castes (principally Brahmins and Thakurs) comprise roughly twenty percent of the population of the State.³ As substantial landowners, these castes have dominated lucrative salaried employment, local government bureaucracies, and landownership in many parts of the State (Hasan, 1998).

A second bloc of households belonging to Hindu middle castes frequently control access to political and economic power in parts of rural UP (Lerche, 1999). This category of household includes the Jats and upper sections of the OBCs, such as the Gujars and Yadavs. The Jats comprise just over two percent of the total population of UP, but often act as local dominant castes in western parts of the State (Srinivas, 1955); they monopolize landownership, non-agricultural sources of wealth, and influence within local state institutions (Jeffrey and Lerche, 2000). Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, Jats and to a lesser extent Gujars were powerfully represented within State and central government (Hasan, 1998; Corbridge and Harris, 2000). This political power allowed the prosperous peasantry to benefit from high agricultural support prices and large subsidies on agricultural inputs. Since the death of their political mentor, the Jat politician Chaudhry Charan Singh, in 1987, Jat and Gujar middle castes have continued to invest profits from agriculture in attempts to join and influence the local state bureaucracy through positioning their sons in government jobs, nurturing networks linking them to the local state, and establishing close connections with district officials (Jeffrey, 2001; 2002; c.f. Chowdhry, 1994; Datta, 1999). Jats have also participated in high-profile farmers' movements aimed at guaranteeing access to cheap inputs and improving the terms of trade be-

³ This figure is based on the 1931 Census, the last census for which caste figures are available.

tween agriculture and industry (Bentall and Corbridge, 1996). In addition, during the late 1990s, Jats successfully pressured the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) politician and Chief Minister of UP, R.K. Gupta, to include Jats in the OBC quota, in spite of their evident failure to meet the criteria for 'backwardness'.

The remainder of UP's population is mainly comprised of Muslims, poorer castes within the OBC category and Dalits. There are elites among Muslims and Dalits in UP. But Muslims, Dalits and poorer OBCs typically possess few material assets and tend to work in exploitative and insecure conditions. This is especially true of Dalits, who have historically suffered from the stigma associated with being classed as 'Untouchable' (Mandelbaum, 1970). In spite of SC reservations, Dalits in UP continue to be concentrated among the poor and confined to manual labor or small-scale entrepreneurship in the informal economy (Mendelsohn and Vicziany, 1998; Lerche, 1999).

The political economy of UP has also changed significantly since the early 1990s. Most notably, the pro-Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) has emerged as a major political force in the State. Established in 1984, the BSP held power in UP four times between 1993 and 2003 under the leadership of a Dalit former schoolteacher, Mayawati, and it won a landslide victory in the State elections in 2007. The BSP has vigorously encouraged Dalits to obtain education, often by drawing on the vision of upward mobility based upon schooling and entry into white-collar employment promoted by the Dalit hero, Dr. Bhim Rao Ambedkar. This drive was allied to attempts to transform the symbolic landscape of UP, for example through the construction of statues representing Ambedkar and other Dalit heroes. The BSP also placed Dalits in key positions within the UP bureaucracy and improved their access to police protection and judicial redress (Pai, 2000).

The efforts of the BSP to increase Dalits' access to power and resources at the local level intersected with changes in the formal system of local government in India. The 73rd Amendment Act, introduced in 1992, aimed to decentralize power. The Act implemented a three-tier system of local government wherein village councils (*panchāyats*) would play a central role in the provision of public services, the creation and maintenance of public goods, and the planning and implementation of development activities. The Act also provided a rotating 33 per cent reservation of *panchāyat* seats for women and reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes according to their population.

The rise of lower castes is also related to an increase in the visibility of student politics in UP. There has been a phenomenal growth in the student population in UP – from 50,000 in 1950 to 1.3 million in 2000 (Kingdon

and Muzammil, 2003) – particularly among middle and low castes. The growing political presence of students in the State has encouraged political parties to seek support among this section of society. With an eye on student votes, UP Chief Minister, Mulayam Singh Yadav, decided in 2003 to re-allow student unions in all higher education institutions in UP after they were banned in most colleges in the late 1970s because of fears over rising student violence.⁴

Recent changes in the politics of UP have therefore tended to bolster dominant sections of society and consolidate the position of a set of middle-ranking castes from prosperous rural backgrounds, such as the Jats and Gujars in western areas of the state and Yadavs in the east. But the rise of the BSP seems to have provided some Dalits with opportunities to raise their political and economic standing, in part through entering higher education.

Researching Student Politics in Meerut City

Meerut district is located near the western edge of UP and had a population of 3.44 million in 1991. The district lies on a level alluvial plain and 79% of the rural land is under cultivation (Jeffrey, 2001). Sugar cane and wheat are the chief crops of the district by value and area. Between the mid-1960s and early 1990s, the introduction of high yielding varieties of wheat and the continued development of sugar cane production and processing in western UP enhanced the profitability of agriculture and encouraged the emergence of a rural middle class, particularly among Jats and Gujars (Jeffrey, 1997; 2001).

Meerut City had a population of just over a million in 2001 and has long been a center for government, army operations, and artisanal production. Between the mid-1960s and late 1980s, the intensification of cash crop agriculture encouraged commercial development in Meerut, and since the early 1990s, Meerut has become a major provider of private health care, non-state education, and financial services. But Meerut remains outside the areas of most significant economic expansion emanating from Delhi, and at least until the mid-2000s the city had not shared in the well-publicized IT boom in the Indian capital.

Meerut possesses a rich history of student politics. Meerut students were energetically involved in the Indian nationalist struggle (Mittal and Habib, 1982). After Independence, students tended to be divided according to whether they supported or opposed Charan Singh. The period from Singh's death in 1987 to the present has been characterized by the rise of

⁴ The U.P. Government banned student union elections again in 2007 following the publication of a government report investigating student politics.

Dalits as political actors and growing influence of Hindu nationalist organizations on higher educational campuses, particularly through its student wing the Akhil Bharatiya Vidhya Parishad (ABVP). But political parties were not as active in student politics in Meerut in the 1990s and 2000s as they were in some other urban centres in UP. The absence of student unions in the most influential college in the city, Meerut College, dissuaded political parties from investing scarce resources in Meerut politics. Indeed, the ABVP was among the few student parties in Meerut in 2004/ 2005 that held regular meetings and possessed office holders.

The research for this paper was conducted between September 2004 and April 2005 and March–April 2007 in Chaudhry Charan Singh University (CCSU) and Meerut College (MC). This paper focuses on CCSU, which was established as an affiliating university in 1965 and offers postgraduate degrees. It was difficult to obtain accurate figures on the size of CCSU, but roughly 2,600 students appear to have been enrolled there in 2003–2004 and perhaps a quarter of a million studied in roughly 400 institutions affiliated to this university, mostly in private colleges established after 1990. About 25% of CCSU students were upper caste and 40% Jats or Gujars. Between 1994 and 2004 the proportion of Dalit students at CCSU rose from roughly 10 per cent to 25 per cent, and male students belonging to the relatively powerful and populous Chamar caste of Dalits accounted for the majority of this increase. Most CCSU students were from rural areas. Of the Jat and Gujar students, about two thirds came from agricultural backgrounds, usually from families possessing at least 8 acres of agricultural land and belonging to a class of rich farmers. Student politics in CCSU related closely to the politics of MC, the oldest college affiliated to CCSU and also the largest in terms of student numbers. In 2003–04 over 16,000 students were enrolled in MC, of which about 15% were upper caste, 50% Jat or Gujar, and 15% Dalit. An even higher proportion of MC students were from rural areas.

My research in CCSU and MC mainly consisted of participant observation and interviews with student politicians and other students. I conducted the interviews in Hindi and Urdu, which I speak fluently, and did not use an interpreter or research assistant. The interviews were semi-structured in the sense that I had a set of key topics that I wanted to discuss with students, mainly relating to political practice, opinions of higher education, and cultural practice. I wrote up my interviews within 24 hours and analyzed them using Atlas Ti data analysis package and employing codes developed from my theoretical ideas and those emerging out of the field notes.

Dominant student politics

The example of Girish offers insights into the practices of dominant student leaders in CCSU.⁵ About thirty in 2004, Girish came from a moderately prosperous rural Jat family in western UP. Girish's father, Ompal, had good social connections with politicians and government bureaucrats in Meerut. Concerned about the future division of his agricultural land, Ompal sent Girish to a private school and expected him to obtain a job outside agriculture, preferably within government service. But Girish had been unable to obtain a government job. As one of Girish's friends put it, in the cut-throat market for government work everyone now needs "*source*"⁶ (social connections) and "*force*" (physical strength), and even then one's chances are remote.

In the early 2000s Girish moved to CCSU and began a political career. Between 2002 and 2004, he strove to establish a good name among his CCSU peers. Girish led demonstrations against malpractice within the university, lobbied the local state on behalf of other students, and assisted his peers in their quest to obtain admission, examination results and help from university officials. Girish spoke of his energetic work in defence of 'the ordinary student'. He told me:

Globalization has created a class of capitalists (*pūñjīpati*). These capitalists just work for their own benefit. They do nothing for anyone else. The capitalists are controlling education as if it is a market commodity (*bazār vastū*). The capitalists just want education to be profitable. They just want *marketing, marketism*. In this environment, no one takes any notice of students' welfare (*chātron ki hit*). I am ready to go to jail for students.

In the two months preceding the student union elections, Girish concentrated on his election campaign. He spent nearly Rs. 200,000⁷ producing color election posters. He also hired a fleet of jeeps to ferry his supporters around Meerut and paid for a local tea stall to distribute free tea and snacks to students. He attended meetings of other Jats on campus at which he persuaded his fellow caste members to rally behind him. Girish was especially concerned during this period about the threat posed by two Dalit political opponents who were trying to seek alliances with Gujars in opposition to Girish.

In the six months after winning a post on the student union, Girish slowly shifted the weight of his efforts away from campaigning around stu-

⁵ I have changed details of Girish's position and political career in order to prevent his being recognized.

⁶ Where terms are italicized and in double quotation marks this indicates that these were the precise words used by my informants.

⁷ Forty rupees was roughly equivalent to one US dollar in 2004.

dent issues and into accumulating money from his position. He bought a car out of money he had earned through acting as a broker between private educational entrepreneurs and the CCSU bureaucracy. Girish had also used his political influence to act as an intermediary between building contractors working on new construction inside the university and the CCSU administration. A Dalit political opponent publicly criticized Girish for using his student union post to make money, and Girish issued vigorous denials in the face of these attacks. But even Girish's friends said that he was making money from his student union post..

When I returned to Meerut in March 2007, Girish was working for a Jat businessman who had established a teaching training college close to Meerut. Girish had advised a Jat businessman and friend of his father's to establish a private college and then helped him obtain affiliation for the college with CCSU. Although I lack details of Girish's daily work for this entrepreneur, several Jat ex-student politicians assisted private educational entrepreneurs belonging to their caste, mainly by assisting them in negotiations with CCSU and helping to suppress student agitations in their usually dilapidated and poorly-funded colleges. On some occasions ex-student leaders would bring armed gangs of young men from their villages to break up demonstrations in private educational institutions.

Like Girish, many middle caste young men in CCSU spent their late teens and early twenties seeking government employment. But by 2004, very few of these men had acquired government work. Young men studying in MC and CCSU were anxious about the scale of unemployment and the increasing importance of money, social contacts, and physical power in the competition for salaried posts. I have described the frustration, boredom and sense of dislocation associated with prolonged educated unemployment in western UP in other, collaborative work (see Jeffrey *et al.* 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2008), and there was a powerful sense among young men in Meerut higher education of being marooned by processes of social and economic development.

Jats and Gujars usually lacked social contacts outside western UP and therefore possibilities to migrate in search of jobs. Instead, some Jats and Gujars left CCSU after completing a postgraduate degree and returned to their family farms. In the context of the rapid subdivision of agricultural land, a few had been forced to enter poorly paid manual wage labor. Others drew upon social contacts, often with fellow caste members living in urban western UP, to obtain private employment in the local informal economy, mainly within consumer goods sales, transport, and agricultural marketing-related activities. Still others – those who figure centrally in this paper – decided to enrol in further degrees while also developing careers as student

politicians and brokers. These men only comprise a small portion of all middle castes studying at CCSU, but they exert a powerful influence over the political atmosphere and everyday running of the university.

Like Girish, many aspiring Jat and Gujar politicians concentrated on acquiring a position on the CCSU student union, which is the pre-eminent source of money, prestige and political influence within higher education in Meerut district and was not affected by the ban on student unions in UP. Of the 30 men who held one of the top two positions in the CCSU student union between 1991 and 2004, 23 were Jats or Gujars. No women, Dalits, or Muslims obtained the post of Student Union President in CCSU during that period. Those who acquired student union posts were usually in their late twenties or early thirties and unmarried. Many of them defined themselves as “unemployed” or “underemployed”.

Girish’s story highlights four important aspects of the political strategies of Jat and Gujar students in CCSU. First, like Girish, these leaders spent considerable effort developing a good reputation among students in preparation for student union elections. As one student leader put it, “politics is like the film industry: you need a good name.” They launched high profile demonstrations against university and government officials, and these agitations were reported in favourable terms by friends within local newspapers and television stations. Student leaders usually kept a dossier of articles and photographs recording their protest activity which they displayed at the public debates which precede student union elections. Most of these demonstrations were peaceful in nature and borrowed upon histories of rural protest, involving, for example, hunger strikes and road blocks. Many student leaders projected an image of being “grassroots” leaders, committed to civil (*sabhyata*) politics, targeted against prevailing “injustice” within education. In their descriptions of their goals, the candidates in the 2004 student union election in CCSU referred most commonly to improving facilities for students, preventing fee hikes, checking the commercialization of education, ending teachers’ harassment of students, and improving the quality of careers advice on campus.

In the immediate run-up to elections, student leaders relied on caste solidarities to win power. They also typically spent between Rs. 150,000 and Rs. 300,000 prior to elections on producing posters, hiring vehicles, and organizing feasts for students. Students obtained much of this money from their families. But they also contacted ex-student activists who put them in contact with political parties. A close link with a political party offered financial sponsorship and social support, and a few State-level politicians came to the CCSU campus prior to elections to endorse particular candidates. Student leaders also tried to obtain the ABVP nomination in advance

of student elections in order to receive organizational assistance for their campaign. Jats and Gujars seeking ABVP backing typically viewed this quest in entirely pragmatic terms and rarely demonstrated an enthusiasm for Hindu nationalist ideas.

A second key theme illustrated by the example of Girish is the importance of student politics as a business. Not all Jat and Gujar student leaders tried to obtain rental incomes from their union posts; some continued to concentrate their efforts on critiquing the commercialization of education and defending ‘the ordinary student’, and I am currently working on a book that will describe the strategies of these young people in detail. But after winning the student union elections, Jat and Gujar student leaders usually concentrated on making money from their positions. As an aspiring student politician explained:

To win an election you need to be able to show that you are fighting for students’ rights. After the election you enter a totally different phase. You establish a commercial relationship with the university administration. You agree not to protest about particular issues, and in return the university administration grants you certain favors.

Even those who competed for student union positions but failed to secure victory could often make money from their accumulated influence; one keen observer of student politics in Meerut said that “all you need is 20 or 30 students behind you and you can capitalize on your influence.”

According to the most reliable estimates, student leaders in 2004/2005 could earn between Rs. 800,000 and Rs. 1,000,000 in a year. Student leaders appeared to earn the bulk of their money through working alongside university officials in extracting money from students seeking admission to CCSU and affiliated institutions. Jats and Gujars worked as paid intermediaries between students and the administration: taking small sums – often called ‘convenience money’ – from students wanting admission to non-vocational courses and up to Rs. 100,000 for students seeking degrees in education, engineering and medicine. They also worked as facilitators for private educational entrepreneurs in their negotiations with CCSU. Student leaders lobbied CCSU university officials to grant affiliation to a private college and in return received seats in that college, which they could auction to students. In addition, student union leaders were sometimes able to influence appointments to teaching and administrative positions within CCSU or affiliated colleges, and they could earn money through selling posts which they controlled to the highest bidder. Moreover, student politicians had some say over the disbursement of contracts and tenders for the construction of government and private educational institutions. Student leaders often received bribes from business interests to channel contracts their way, and, after leaving university, some leaders became contractors themselves. The com-

mercialization of education in Meerut district – and the continuing forms of state regulation that are shaping this neo-liberalization – had therefore offered enterprising young men possibilities to make substantial private incomes. Student leaders redistributed a portion of their earnings to those who had financed their student union campaigns. They also invested money in fighting future student elections and a few students paid university professors to provide extra-university tutorials and assistance writing Masters or PhD dissertations.

Jats and Gujars' capacity to make money from their student union positions rested on their accumulated social and cultural capital. Student leaders were able to draw upon affinities of habitus associated with their caste and class background to establish social links within government and the university. Student politicians had been to types of English-medium schools and degree colleges similar to those in which bureaucrats had studied, and they often found opportunities to discuss their educational history with officials. Jats and Gujars also found ways to communicate their middle caste status within social settings, for example, in the Jat case, by prefacing their name with the honorific term 'Chaudhry'. It is important to emphasize the incessant *work* associated with these forms of class reproduction. Jat and Gujar young men had to pay constant attention to demonstrating appropriate forms of comportment. This point surfaced most strikingly in students' hostels when Jats and Gujars were preparing to make a group visit to an office. During the frantic preparations, student leaders carefully inspected the clothes of their supporters and issued detailed instructions on how clothes should be worn. I was frequently caught up in debates about whether shirt collars should be tucked inside the necks of pullovers or whether to wear jeans or chinos for a meeting with a bigwig. So skilled had student politicians become in the art of self presentation that Jats and Gujars were fairly effective in enrolling upper caste (Brahmin and Rajput) officials in their political projects, sometimes through pretending to be upper caste.

A third aspect of the political strategies of Jat and Gujar leaders that emerges from the example of Girish is of the possibilities that becoming a student leader provide for a measure of long-term economic security. After leaving formal office, dominant Jat and Gujat politicians often used their contacts to obtain temporary work as political fixers. In other instances, they tried to obtain permanent employment as university professors or advocates: jobs which they could combine with political activity. Four ex-student leaders from CCSU between 1990 and 2004 had secured teaching positions in government colleges by 2007 and a further three had become lawyers. Since the early 1990s, no Jat or Gujar politicians have entered district representative government, let alone State-level or central politics. Student leaders argued

that the chances of becoming a State- or central-level politician were extremely remote and that positioning oneself as a local broker within markets for education while also working as a professor or advocate offered a more assured income.

A fourth theme to emerge from Girish's story is of the importance of maintaining a clean image as a student politician. Jat and Gujar student leaders circulated moral discourses stating their opposition to all forms of 'corruption' and tried to distract attention from their earnings through referring to their activities euphemistically as "*work*" or "*business*". Jats and Gujars also attempted to obscure their dealings through blankly refusing to acknowledge that they made any money from their student union posts. I sometimes watched some of the most notoriously entrepreneurial student leaders issuing challenges to their audiences at large public gatherings: "You tell me one instance in which I have been corrupt!" When students started listing examples, the student leader would dismiss their arguments as self-interested or accuse his opponent of being a member of a rival faction.

In private space, however, student political leaders sometimes dropped their claim to be opposed to making money from their political reputation. Several Jat and Gujar students actively boasted of their capacity to turn their student union activity to financial advantage. Central to these discussions was the notion that, as wealthy members of middle caste families from rural areas, Jats and Gujars possess a capacity to "bend the system" or "*adjust*". In this narrative, a Jat or Gujar has an imagined store of cunning strategies and rural duplicitous tactics that may be deployed in the search for gain. In addition, student leaders argued that as Jats and Gujars from rural areas they are distinctively equipped with the pragmatism, bravery and masculine prowess to co-opt the local state. Jats and Gujars imagined their activity as a form of *jugār*. *Jugār* means literally 'provisioning', but in this context it connoted the economical, creative and judicious use of resources in the service of a definite aim. *Jugār* signalled a type of self-conscious cosmopolitanism, in Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan's (2003) sense of the capacity to meld together political strategies learnt in different spheres in order to defend social interests. The concept of *jugār* offered a means to protect a core of self-esteem in the face of long-term exclusion from salaried work while also marking poorer members of their caste, lower castes and women as relatively inept political actors.

Spaces of resistance and counter-resistance

The rise of Dalits within CCSU politics since the late 1990s constituted an important threat to Jat and Gujar accumulation strategies. The emergence of

the BSP in UP politics encouraged Dalit men to become political entrepreneurs, as it has in rural areas of western UP (see Jeffrey *et al.*, 2005a). By 2004, there was a set of self-styled 'leaders' (*netā*) among the Dalit student population at CCSU who were keen to challenge Jat and Gujar power, either through becoming student union leaders themselves or through circulating critiques of dominant politicians' practices within and outside CCSU. Those men who pursued political careers were usually from relatively prosperous Dalit backgrounds but they possessed much less money and fewer social contacts than middle caste student politicians.

Building social networks formed the cornerstone of the political strategies of Dalit leaders. Dalits tried to develop webs of influence within state bureaucracies through volunteering to conduct paperwork in government offices, ingratiating themselves with government and university officials, and developing close links with the few Dalits in state employment. Dalit leaders also spent long periods of the day in their hostel rooms composing letters to senior government officials and politicians that chronicled the 'corruption' of student political leaders. For two especially energetic and charismatic Dalit leaders these networking efforts had been fairly successful. Among the most notable achievements of these men during the period October 2004 to April 2005 in Meerut was to intervene in a case in which a Dalit student had been excluded from a BEd College, lodge a complaint against university bureaucrats who had appointed a Jat to a position in the university reserved for a SC, and bring to justice a drunk-driver who had killed a Dalit boy in a road accident. Dalit leaders were also building new rural-urban linkages through acting as points of contact for their rural community: for example, advising younger men on career opportunities in Meerut, helping relatives obtain urban private health care, and facilitating the move of promising Dalit students into relatively well-run Meerut private schools.

Dalits combined their social networking with a type of low-level aestheticized politics aimed at communicating their moral superiority to higher castes. In particular, Dalit students counter-posed a vision of Dalit plain-living, honesty and straightforwardness with middle caste student leaders' ostentation, cunning, and duplicity. In this narrative Dalits were always depicted as 'straight' (*sīdha*), while Jats and Gujars were imagined as crafty, unreliable, and impossible to read. Dalits tried to project this sense of their plain living through wearing simple clothes, avoiding decoration in their hostel rooms, and cultivating a 'civilized' air around campus. Central to this anti-corruption drive among low castes was the notion that Dalits are more assiduous in their studies than Jats and Gujars and do not have to rely on favouritism and corrupt mechanisms to pass examinations. This cultural project was strongly gendered – Dalits emphasized their capacity as success-

ful men to avoid the temptations associated with a 'corrupt' lifestyle, such as sexual promiscuity and drinking – but it was important in challenging some aspects of Jat and Gujar dominance. Indeed, Dalit symbolic resistance was written onto the campus landscape. In the early 2000s, Dalit new leaders had some success in changing the iconography of CCSU to reflect Dalit pride: a hostel was named after Bhim Rao Ambedkar in the early 2000s, an Ambedkar garden was created on campus, and Ambedkar's birthday had become exuberantly celebrated during annual events inside CCSU.

But Dalits' attempts to improve low castes' access to resources and political power moderated rather than transformed processes of class and caste reproduction within CCSU, in part because some Dalits themselves sought to make money from their political reputation but also because of the counter-resistance of Jats and Gujars. Increasingly over the first few months of 2005 I became aware of the political importance of the *spatial strategies* that middle caste student leaders use to defend class and caste advantages. Jats have typically experienced the rise of Dalits as an affront to their territorial control over local space, and, in response, made efforts to *secure* and *straddle* local space. These strategies long predate the late 1990s but their importance to processes of class formation and reproduction has become especially pronounced since the rise of Dalit leaders.

First, Jats worked at *securing* local territory in the context of increasing Dalit efforts to construct alternative political networks and appropriate campus space. Monopolizing hostel rooms was often a starting point for such an effort. Many Jat fixers had spent much of their early political careers colluding with hostel wardens and higher university officials to register multiple hostel rooms in their name, which they then sub-let to their caste peers. Dominant student leaders also toured the campus on motorcycles with the explicit objective of marking their power, a practice institutionalized in MC in the form of an officially-sanctioned 'vigilance committee' which was dominated by Jat men and made daily rounds of the campus to police the behaviour of other students. In addition, Jats launched high profile protests against the alleged 'bias' of the university and college administration towards Dalits. For example, in February 2004 Jat students attacked members of the CCSU administration who were conducting a midnight raid of one of the student hostels in search of firearms in part because they felt that the administration was demonizing middle castes as troublemakers. In March 2005 CCSU student leaders forcibly occupied a new hostel with the explicit objective of excluding Dalits and ensuring that their middle caste supporters received accommodation. Jats often conducted such protests where caste was not an issue, particularly during the early part of the political careers.

But their actions tended to be especially intense where they felt that their caste and class interests were under threat.

An abiding concern with defending local space was also evident in the tactics used by Jat students during political protests, for example: blocking local roads (*rastā roko*), surrounding university officials in their offices (*gherāo*), and storming lectures to prevent classes from taking place (*class band*). Many of these protests involved students from a range of caste and class backgrounds. But where Jats felt that their caste and class interests were in jeopardy, the university administration tended to feel the full force of Jat middle class concern over shoring up its local spatial control. Thus, for example, during separate caste-related protests in 2004, Jats held the Vice-Chancellor and proctorial board of CCSU hostage for eight hours, laid siege to the CCSU canteen, and – in the lurid language of a newspaper headline that appeared the next day – “transformed the Vice-Chancellor’s office into a make-shift boxing arena” (Prakash, 2004).

These spatial strategies were underpinned by Jat leaders’ control over the means of force. Student leaders often had better access to the police than Dalits or even upper castes on campus, in part because many Jats had prior acquaintance with low-ranking police officers through senior kin. Jats had also cultivated close links with politicians in Meerut who could influence the process through which senior police officials are transferred. One Senior Superintendents of Police in Meerut in the early 2000s said that he had a list of influential families, many of them Jats, who “could not be touched”. This is not to argue that the police were always or inevitably biased in their relations with students. But my research suggested that the police usually sided with Jats in political struggles on campus. For example, in 2004 the police and local politicians turned a blind eye when many Jats beat a group of Dalit students. Three months later they were similarly inactive when a female Dalit student was harassed by higher caste students close to the CCSU campus. Early in 2005, the police and a local politician assisted Jats in illegally occupying a new hostel in campus. In some high profile cases involving transparent state or university malfeasance, Dalit reformers were on hand. But in smaller and everyday state/society interactions Suresh and his peers had to ration their time and energy according to personal considerations. Suresh had a limited stock of influence, and there were simply too few Dalit reformers to serve the increasing number of poor Dalit students in their negotiations with the state, dominant politicians, and university bureaucrats.

Jat success in dominating local space was also underpinned by their performative skill within local offices. One Dalit reformer said that, while he has a “feel” for the manner in which he should present himself in front of government and university officials, he still lacks the type of ease, confi-

dence and *style* possessed by Jat fixers. “I am good, but I am not as good as they are”, he said. On other occasions, Dalits said that they have not yet developed sufficient information about the workings of local government and nature of “corruption”. Dalit reformers routinely suffered from what Bourdieu calls “socially imposed agoraphobia:”, a sense of being “out of place” that reflects the person’s social position with respect to broader social forces but which *feels* overwhelmingly like a *personal failing*. Through capitalizing on affinities of habitus, Jats were able to cultivate stronger links with university bureaucrats and government officials. In key situations of conflict or negotiation, Dalits frequently encountered higher caste student leaders who were better qualified, more knowledgeable, and confidently re-asserted their dominance. Jat fixers reinforced these inequalities by denigrating Dalits in everyday discourse. Jat leaders sometimes argued that politically active Dalits retain certain distinctive markers that single them out as ‘backward’. For example, one Jat young man told me that something ‘thickens the movements of Dalits’, which means that they conduct political demonstrations in a clumsy manner. In other cases, higher caste student leaders joked about the incompetence and showiness of Dalit politics, which they contrasted with their own ‘proper politics’.

As the example of Girish suggests, another aspect of Jat’ spatial strategies resided in their capacity to *straddle* the rural and urban. Jats on campus had a pool of rural ideas and resources upon which they could draw in an urban setting. The capacity of Jat and Gujar political leaders to redeploy tactics derived from rural politics to acquire student union posts (c.f. Lieten and Srivastava, 1999) was evident in their organization of lavish parties for their supporters on the nights running up to the election and efforts to intimidate voters on polling day, for example.

Such tactics reflected student leaders’ superior access to private transport relative to Dalits and poorer Jats. Since the late 1990s, one of the first actions of a student after winning a union post was to buy an expensive, fast, air-conditioned car. Even before being elected, aspiring student leaders paid close attention to acquiring vehicles for their political campaigns. They toured the suburbs of Meerut and surrounding countryside to canvas students living at home, and they also arranged to ferry students to the electoral booth on polling day. Jat fixers frequently enrolled villagers in their demonstrations, transported rural leaders to give speeches in their support on campus, and travelled to villages to recruit local “*muscle*”, who then accompanied them to the city to intimidate opponents. In attempting to bring the rural into the city to achieve political goals, student political leaders’ strategies echoed those of the leaders of the Bharatiya Kisan Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, who staged high-profile rural ‘camps’ within several western UP cities

as part of their protest against government agricultural policies (see Bental and Corbridge, 1996).

These spatial strategies had important implications for the future of Dalit student politics in Meerut. In the absence of durable opportunities to counter middle caste power in CCSU, aspiring Dalit politicians were increasingly choosing not to contest CCSU student union elections or critique the practices of dominant student leaders within social networks in Meerut. Several Dalits argued that their chances of acquiring a CCSU position are too low and that time spent complaining about malpractice within the local state rarely yields results. Instead, two Dalit leaders had established a separate SC/ST student union in CCSU to represent low caste interests.

Other Dalits were orienting their political efforts outside of CCSU altogether. Two prominent Dalit leaders in CCSU have recently become disinterested in politics within the university. Instead, they are planning to run for village- or district-level political posts. As one of these students put it, “our pathway in student politics is blocked, so we will win power through the proper channels.” Student politics in Meerut was showing signs of splitting into two spheres – or ‘fields’ (Bourdieu, 1984) – one dominated by Jats and Gujars and characterized by informal networking and the other especially associated with Dalits and entailing the pursuit of positions within government representative bodies.

Conclusions

During the 1970s and 1980s a rural middle class emerged from the ranks of the rich peasantry in Meerut district, western UP. Jat and Gujar young men had largely been able to reproduce this social advantage in the sphere of student politics. They had successfully defended the social, economic and cultural gains that their families made in the 1970s and 1980s through taking advantage of new opportunities for rent-seeking associated with the privatization of education in urban areas in the 1990s and 2000s. They had also used their money, social networking skills and cultural capital to tackle the threat posed by Dalit political actors. These conclusions offer a counterpoint to recent writing on ‘Dalit revolution’ in UP (Pai, 2000; Jaffrelot, 2003; see also Jeffrey *et al.*, 2008). They also highlight how class exploitation in contemporary provincial north India – as in other contexts – is not solely based in employment relations but rather proceeds through forms of social networking, symbolic violence, and spatial exclusion (c.f. Bourdieu, 1984; Savage and Butler, 1992; Jeffrey, 2001).

The case of student politics in western UP broadly supports the argument made by several recent scholars that middle classes in India are turning

their back on the type of representative politics that promoted their rise in the 1970s and 1980s in favor of subverting state policy at the local level, and thus “kicking away the ladder” in an important sense (Deshpande, 2003: 150). Jats and Gujars were generally no longer interested in capturing formal political posts but rather channelled their efforts into economic accumulation through informal political networks and via various forms of “opportunity hoarding” at the local level (Fernandes and Heller, 2006). John Harriss (2006) has shown that a middle class in Chennai rejected representative politics because they considered it “dirty” and “corrupt”. In Meerut district, rich Jat farmers and middle caste students’ reluctance to invest time and money in representative politics reflected the specific party political conjuncture in 1990s UP, where the death of Charan Singh and the Mandalization of politics had conspired to weaken the farming lobby; many Jats felt that they lacked a successful party at the State-level that could durably articulate their interests. Jats also distanced themselves from representative politics for the simple reason that the chances of becoming a State- or central-level politician in the early 2000s were extremely remote relative to the rich pickings available in the informal economy of local state practices (c.f. Harriss-White, 2003).

Through adopting a grounded, relational approach to class analysis, I have highlighted the unremitting *work* associated with becoming and remaining middle class. Jats and Gujars engage in a gruelling program of political activity aimed at protecting their power. This is a point that comes across especially clearly in the sphere of student leaders’ cultural production. As Willis (1982) argued, young people seek to legitimate their practices and strive for better futures not only through their economic and political actions, but also at the cultural level through repeated and energetic stylistic practices, which sometimes transform broader structures and escape the confines of a class habitus. In the Meerut case, Jats and Gujars sought to protect their class power through engaging in a rich array of forms of cultural production: imitating social reformers in their early political careers and building tight friendship networks around the theme of their cultural versatility, for example. Through such practices, Jat and Gujar young men not only *reproduced* but *deepened* their power.

Finally, the paper has emphasized the spatiality of class and caste advantage. It is tempting to conclude that rural middle classes in this part of India have shored up their power through a deliberate *localist* project (c.f. Harriss-White, 2003). Rather than seeking to influence politics at the regional and national scale, they have preferred to consolidate their hold over social capital, cultural capital and physical force in their immediate vicinity. But efforts to *secure* campus space coexisted with attempts to *straddle* the

rural and urban. The strategies of Jat and Gujar politicians act as an important conduit for the flow of ideas between rural and urban areas. A spatial frame of reference provides telling insights into the resilience and creativity of those sections of the Indian population who are neither straightforwardly “elite” or “subaltern”. More broadly, my analysis points to the need for a culturally and organizationally sensitive political economy approach to the study of class and cosmopolitan practice, one that refuses to imagine people as the dupes of social forces, but which nevertheless remains attuned to the value of Bourdieu’s theoretical tools for an understanding of politics *on the ground*. This argument is especially important in a context in which fewer and fewer scholars in India and abroad have the time, inclination and funding to conduct ethnographic field research on issues of power and inequality.

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