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Rewriting the hills: Youth sociality as a mode of navigating unemployment in a context of outmigration in North India

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Abstract

This article examines the ways in which educated yet unemployed young people attempt to configure ways of being productive in a small hill town in North India. Young people who do not migrate to large urban centres from this township are the subject of contradictory discourses: in some moments they are seen as an antidote to the 'problem of migration', but in other moments they are ridiculed for not making good use of their time. Both discourses suggest a present wherein young people are not productive. Drawing on ethnographic material gathered over a ten-month period, this article frames youth sociality as a mode registering a sense of productivity and navigating unemployment. I argue that while hanging out at a computer shop, young men were distancing themselves from notions of idling and creating masculine youth cultures in which they sought to situate themselves as productive young people. I make this argument by unpacking exchanges between these young men and by analysing the tangible ways they helped the shop function. I also draw debates about youth sociality into dialogue with theoretical insights from rural geography to illuminate how educated youth attempt to imbue rural and peri-urban space with new possibilities. I show how educated youth attempt to reanimate rural space and forge affirmative rural futures by emphasizing their connections with Indian modernity. Attending to the ways in which educated yet unemployed youth attempt to situate themselves within productive relations is set to become of increasing importance given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Youth; migration; education; unemployment; India

Introduction

On one of my first visits to Pauri Town, a small hill town in the Indian Himalayas, I was introduced to a man who worked with a non-governmental organization (NGO) that was seeking to stem migration from nearby villages. During our conversation, the NGO worker relayed a story about going to a village where he found an elderly man in tears. The man was the only person who still lived permanently in the village and

he explained that his crop had been eaten by wild pigs. 'This would not have happened,' the elderly man had said 'if my sons did not move away.' Later in the same conversation the NGO worker went on to explain that the young people who did live in villages did not make good use of their time. He said that 'In the evening you see them making jokes, ragging on others and drinking alcohol.' Over ten months of fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017, I heard many variations of these discourses and read similar arguments in newspaper articles. Taken together, they attest to the competing ways in which youth and migration are conceptualized. In the first anecdote, the absence of young men is said to contribute to—and even cause—rural decline: a harvest was destroyed because of the absence of young men. Outmigration, from this perspective, is a 'problem to be solved'. Yet in the second anecdote, the presence of young men in villages is said to undermine their social cohesion. These discourses effectively place youth living in the region in a double bind: migrate away and contribute to the problem, or remain in villages and be the problem.

This article explores how young men navigate these tensions by developing modes of being productive in their daily lives. It does so by analysing the practices of educated yet un(der)employed young men who live in the vicinity of Pauri Town who spent large amounts of time socializing at a computer shop in the town centre. I initially went to this shop, which I call Bhandari Infotech, to conduct research among 'non-migrants' and to investigate how their attempts to make a living compared with those of migrants. But thinking about the young men I encountered as 'non-migrants' soon seemed problematic. The term 'non-migrants' oriented analytical attention towards what they have *not* done, rather than what they *have* done and can do (cf. Chea and Huijsmans 2018; Deuchar 2021). It also downplayed their agency and concealed important differences between these young men. But the fieldwork I conducted at the computer shop attested to the potent ways in which young people insisted on their productive capacities. Sometimes, for example, young men teased one another about their inability to find work—which in turn revealed the importance of being productive. At other times, they assisted their elders and peers at the computer shop with tasks such as translating documents or helping to navigate the internet. In this article, I argue that while hanging out at Bhandari Infotech, young men were distancing themselves from notions of idling and creating masculine youth cultures and spaces in which they sought to situate themselves as productive young people.

A rich set of studies in Asia and elsewhere has shown how youth produce social bonds and ties in spaces such as internet cafes (Nisbett 2013), tea stalls (Jeffrey 2010; Masquelier 2013), shopping malls (Lukose 2009; McGuire 2013), and other sites of sociality and exchange (Langevang 2008; Mains 2007; Weiss 2004, 2009). Many of these studies are relevant for my purposes insofar as they illuminate the importance of friendship and humour for navigating social change. Yet the most pertinent theme of this literature concerns how youth create spaces and bonds as they grapple with protracted unemployment (Jeffrey 2010; Mains 2012; Masquelier 2019; Weiss 2009). In her study of unemployed youth in Niger, for example, Masquelier (2019) argues that tea drinking rituals in conversation groups provide a way for unemployed young men to punctuate excess time, and to sustain forms of sociality which make waiting purposeful (see also Fioratta 2015). In the North Indian context, Jeffrey (2010: 4) argues that a shared sense of limbo among educated yet unemployed youth presented

opportunities to mobilize politically and to fashion novel cultural styles, as well as to acquire new skills and competencies. In line with these studies, I unpack the subtle ways in which youth sought to register a sense of progression through time as they hung out at Bhandari Infotech. Yet where other scholars have shown how young people socialize in ways that bridge class divides and other axes of social difference (Jeffrey 2010; Masquelier 2019; Nisbett 2013), I argue that young men created gendered social bonds which subordinated women and those who were not educated.

This article also pushes debates about youth sociality in new directions by drawing them into closer conversation with insights from rural geography and cognate disciplines. Scholars within these disciplines have emphasized how constructions of rurality are shaped by political, economic, cultural, and social relationships (Halfacree 1993, 2006; Rigg 2007; Woods 2011). Thinking about rural space in this way does not mean that dominant and normative meanings associated with it are downplayed, but demands that attention be given to the dynamic and contested ways in which spaces are given meaning (Berckmoes and White 2016; Deuchar 2019; Mathur 2015; White 2021). Schut's (2019) analysis of youth in rural Indonesia, for example, demonstrates how some degree holders attempt to forge social uplift in the villages in which they live. In contrast to migration research which often suggests that rural youth are compelled to move to urban locations (for example, Crivello 2011; Punch 2015), Schut's participants devised a range of strategies, particularly through volunteering, to try and effect development in their communities (see also Klenk 2010; Koskimaki 2019). Such analyses are pertinent for my purposes insofar as they create theoretical scope for exploring the ways in which young people rework the meanings associated with rural spaces. Yet where some of these studies emphasize how notions of 'village uplift' inform young people's practices, I draw on emerging works that show how young people emphasize their connections with Indian modernity to reanimate the value of rural settings (Deuchar 2019; Dyson and Jeffrey 2021; Mwaura 2017).

The remainder of this article is divided into six main sections. The following section geographically situates this study by outlining the political economy of Uttarakhand. The second section shows how young men registered Bhandari Infotech as a site of productivity. I do this by showing how jokes and humour were framed by a discursive relation to productivity, as well as by analysing how young men made sense of the time they spent there. The third section shows how young men were productive in more tangible ways. Young men who gathered at Bhandari Infotech used their skills to assist customers but also learned new skills. The fourth section shows how and why young men tended to hang out Bhandari Infotech rather than other places nearby, and the fifth section discusses how they challenged dominant understandings of rural space that work to define it as isolated or by what it lacks. I argue that young men hung out at Bhandari Infotech not only to avoid places where uneducated youth were said to congregate, but also because it afforded them the opportunity to emphasize their connections with broader currents of Indian modernity. In the concluding section, I outline the main arguments and suggest that attending to the productive capacities of jobless youth outside of large urban centres is set to be of increasing importance, given the extent of educated unemployment and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The political economy of Uttarakhand

Young men's decisions not to migrate for work were something of a transgression in the context of Pauri Garhwal, the district within Uttarakhand of which Pauri Town is the headquarters. This is because gendered labouring practices in this part of North India have historically been bound up with migration strategies (Rangan 2000; Whittaker 1984). In the early nineteenth century, the British ceded tracts of land in the Indian Himalayas so as to harvest timber for the railway and shipbuilding industries. Many villagers had relied on access to such land to forge a livelihood and thus had to diversify their livelihood strategies (Guha 1989). Increasing numbers of people moved from remote villages to small hill towns in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which led to the growth of peri-urban hubs such as Pauri Town (Berreman 1963). While the town itself continued to develop as a hub of connectivity and exchange, there was little attempt to develop large-scale industry that would have created jobs and added value to products that were exported from the region (Bora 1996). Many of the processes that had hampered development during the colonial period continued after 1947. As Drew (2017) points out, the economic interests of the mountainous regions were neglected by the Nehruvian government in favour of large-scale nation-building projects. The combined effects of these processes have been deleterious for the region. Despite a successful statehood movement in 2000 which mobilized around issues such as unemployment, environmental degradation, and development (Mawdsley 1998, 1999), the population of Pauri Garhwal declined in the first decade of the 2000s (Government of Uttarakhand 2017).

The Uttarakhand hills have received considerable infrastructural investment from the state government and other agencies in recent decades (Government of Uttarakhand 2017), but social and economic divides between the hills and plains districts have been compounded. Economic growth accelerated when Uttarakhand became a separate state, but economic opportunities have been concentrated almost exclusively in cities in the plains (Jakimow 2019; World Bank 2012). Young people who choose not to migrate, such as those in this study, have considerable difficulty generating viable livelihood strategies. At the same time, many degree holders who migrate in pursuit of such white-collar opportunities obtain lower level jobs in the service sector in cities such as Dehradun, and often experience prolonged periods of unemployment (Deuchar 2014; Government of India 2019; Mamgain and Reddy 2016).

High levels of outmigration and a crisis in employment generation have fuelled long-standing social and cultural discourses which work to define the Uttarakhand hills by what they lack (Chakraborty 2018; Mathur 2015; Moller 2000). These discourses not only categorize the hills themselves in derogatory ways, but also characterize *pahari log*—or 'mountain people'—in a similar fashion. Dominant constructions of *pahari log*, for example, often define them as backward, primitive, and uneducable (Howard 2017; Moller 2000). Such discourses conceal the structural inequalities that hamper development and conceptualize hardship as the result of individuals' own limitations. At other times, *pahari log* are considered to be simple, pure, and peaceful (Galvin 2013). While these latter constructions are arguably less offensive, they nevertheless work to disregard the viewpoints of those living in the region and downplay the hardships they are compelled to navigate.

Despite the power and durability of these discourses, attempts to register the Uttarakhand hills as static and unchangeable are belied by the dynamism of rural

spaces in North India. Based on fieldwork in the neighbouring state of Uttar Pradesh, Satendra Kumar (2016) highlights how a rise in non-farm employment, the introduction of new technologies, growing educational opportunities, emerging infrastructure projects, and welfare programmes are changing power structures and reshaping rural space (Dyson 2014; Kumar 2016: 61; Tenhunen 2018). In a similar vein, Koskimaki's (2019) study of youth politicians in hill towns in Uttarakhand, for example, shows how some returning migrants use their knowledge and experiences of migration to carve out livelihoods as local politicians. Joshi (2015) shows how *pahari* youth who drive shared taxis between the hills and plains in Uttarakhand have created opportunities to enjoy a consumer lifestyle, make an income, and establish new forms of connectivity, particularly through digital media. Joshi (2015) suggests that this has enabled some young men to disrupt salient forms of identity which depict a static synergy between the hills as a place and the hills as a people. These studies attest to the ways in which youth are using new technologies and experiences to create social and economic opportunities and reconfigure dominant understandings of rural space. A key feature of Koskimaki's (2019) and Joshi's (2015) work is how young people leverage experiences of mobility in strategic ways (see also Deuchar 2019; Dyson 2019; Dyson and Jeffrey 2021; Koskimaki 2016, 2017). In what follows, I build on this literature by demonstrating how a group of educated young men develop modes of being productive without leveraging mobility experiences.

The ethnographic material presented here was produced during ten months of fieldwork conducted in 2016 and 2017. I visited the computer shop regularly over a six-month period and produced material through semi-structured interviews, opportunistic conversations, and participant observation. I conducted the research as part of a larger project which investigated how jobless degree holders navigated unemployment. The larger study was a multi-sited ethnography (Marcus 1995) wherein I regularly travelled between the Uttarakhand hills and plains. It involved 104 young people, but this article draws on a subset of 24 young men. Each of these young men was among the first generation in their families to obtain college degrees and were aged between 20 and 30. All of them had competed their degrees at a college in the town centre and all participants were General Caste. Some of them had been unemployed for up to five years at the time of fieldwork; however, most had been jobless for approximately two years. Eight young men had previously moved to large cities to find work, but had returned home without having secured the kinds of jobs they aspired to. They had decided that they did not want to migrate for work in the future. The remaining men had not left Pauri Town for the purposes of pursuing further education or work.

Humour, productivity, and friendship

Bhandari Infotech is a small computer shop in the centre of Pauri Town which its owner, Gaurav, opened in 2014. Gaurav was a college graduate who had previously made a small income by repairing mobile phones. He was 26 years old in 2016 and had completed a degree in 2012. His father had owned a small restaurant in the town centre but had retired some years earlier, and his mother still worked on a daily basis in the family's small landholdings. Although some of his family members were quite sceptical about his prospects in Pauri Town, his computer shop has proven to be quite successful. A broad shift towards online services has meant that there is increased

demand for computers and access to the internet. People come to the shop for assistance with typing and printing documents, filling in online application forms, making online purchases, and other such tasks. Very few people own computers, and fewer still have the skills and competencies needed to use them. In these circumstances, Gaurav considers Bhandari Infotech to be providing an important service to the area and he has been able to generate a reasonable income.

The shop itself consisted of two small rooms; the first with a desk and computer which Gaurav called his 'office', and the other immediately next door which contained three computers and a printer. In many ways the shopfront is indistinguishable from those nearby. It is made out of timber and appears quite old, with two long bench seats running along the shopfront offering customers a place to sit as well as young people a place to come and hang out.

The set of young men who regularly gathered at Bhandari Infotech can usefully be delineated into three subsets. The first and most numerous subset consisted of 12 young men who had completed college degrees but referred to themselves as unemployed. They were preparing for government examinations and came to Bhandari for breaks between their studies. A second set of seven young men worked informally in the local area. Six of these young men had college degrees and they made a living by taking advantage of whatever economic opportunities they could find and create locally. These young men did not do manual work, but usually undertook various kinds of brokerage. A third and final set of young men consisted of five college graduates who held lower level government positions in the area. Four of these young men were underemployed; they had contract positions, which are increasingly common and very insecure, and they would have liked to work more than they did, while one youth had a coveted and ongoing position within the state education department.

There were caste differences between the young men in this study but they were spread quite evenly across these subsets. Subtle hierarchies among them related instead to their employment status and employment prospects, which were bound up in factors like competency in English, the qualification they had obtained, and their ability and capacity to communicate with others. Other factors that affected their position in the hierarchies included their age and marriage prospects. But these factors were always in tension with each other. Older participants in their late twenties, for example, tended to be in a stronger position to tell the younger men what to do, particularly when it came to assisting customers. But those who were older were also said to have more limited employment prospects than those who were much younger. Similarly, those who were older and without employment were not thought to be suitable husband material, with one participant explaining that if a man is unemployed at the age of 30, a potential spouse and their family would think 'What is wrong with him?' In this section, I argue that the interactions within and across these sets of young men were productive of masculine youth cultures which sought to create meaning and value amid acute social and economic uncertainty.

Light-hearted humour and jokes were perhaps the most immediate way that playful and productive tensions manifested among these young men. A telling exchange took place shortly after my initial visit between Saurabh and Jaspal, each of whom was 26 years old. Saurabh graduated from college with an engineering degree in 2014 and had been preparing for government examinations since that time. He lived in a village nearby and visited the shop in ways that were typical of the first set of young

men, although he was perhaps its most frequent visitor—attending most days of the week and often on more than one occasion in a single day. Jaspal's activities were typical of the second set of young men; he worked informally as a courier distributing goods that arrived by bus each morning from Delhi and Dehradun to people and businesses. On this particular morning, he delivered some spare parts Gaurav had ordered for computer repairs, and then sat outside with Saurabh and others for a short while.

I had not yet met Jaspal and he enquired as to why I was here. When I explained that I was doing research about what it is like to grow up in Pauri and live there after completing one's studies, Jaspal quickly interjected. He motioned to Saurabh and said that it was no use speaking to him because he was 'getting old but not growing up'. This aroused some laughter among three other young men who had congregated nearby. Saurabh looked at me and said 'See Andrew, you can come back here in ten years' time and Jaspal will still be here, still doing the same things.' Part of Saurabh's confidence lay in the fact that, should he not get a government position, he believed that he would be able to secure a private sector job because of his engineering degree. Jaspal, by contrast, had an arts degree which is often considered to offer no alternatives other than government posts, and it is regarded as nearly impossible to secure ones that are suitable. Nevertheless, Jaspal was not fazed by Saurabh's rebuttal: 'Okay Saurabh,' he said ironically, 'as long as you remember us when you become chief minister.' This met with quite loud laughter from all those who were present, and even Saurabh had to humour him by joining in, effectively conceding defeat in the process. Shortly afterwards Jaspal stood up to leave, giving a Saurabh a good-natured pat on the back and explaining that he had 'work to do'.

In an immediate sense these jokes made for quite a convivial atmosphere. One was always entertained by the young men's wit and humour when hanging out at Bhandari Infotech. As Craig Jeffrey (2010: 102) points out, a shared sense of limbo can precipitate a sense of irony, sarcasm, and mischief among young men. But such performances also revealed—and were constitutive of—shared values among these young men. What Saurabh and Jaspal struggled over in their exchange was the ability to demonstrate their productive capacity. Jaspal's initial barb at Saurabh was incisive precisely because it ridiculed how he spent his time. To say that Saurabh is 'getting old without growing up' is to signal an incongruence between his biological age, and the social and cultural norms that mark one's successful realization of adulthood. Saurabh's response implied that his own productivity was deferred, that by pursuing education he would be much more productive in the future than Jaspal is in the present. Jaspal did not directly deny Saurabh's claim, but his ironic retort was intended to underscore the futility of pursuing government examinations and to highlight what he felt were Saurabh's unrealistic aspirations. Finally, his departing remark appealed to the immediacy and potency of the present: For Jaspal to state 'I have work to do' was to point out that Saurabh, unambiguously, did not.

As with Jaspal, each set of young men attempted to articulate their strategies as part of a hopeful narrative (Mains 2017). The third set of young men—those who had government positions of various kinds, for example—would often come to Bhandari Infotech in business attire—a white, collared shirt and black trousers—which clearly differentiated them from other youth. To present themselves in this way was to declare that they had a job but were not at work. One young man, Manjeet, had a short-term contract position with the state government. He said that he was only hanging

out because he could 'afford to'. He later explained that he did not mean this only 'in the money sense', but also that he could afford to do so without being ridiculed because others knew he had employment: 'I could come and sit here all day, no matter. People know this is part of the job.' Notwithstanding such comments, these young men did not want to be seen as lazy. Whenever I saw Manjeet at the computer shop he would often make explicit that he was 'taking a break' or that he was 'relaxing'. He would occasionally use a computer at Bhandari Infotech to send emails, but more commonly sat on the bench seat out the front of the shop and conversed with his friends. This was a discursive and strategic way of punctuating time: to be taking a break now was to suggest that he would be busy later on.

At other times this set of young men sought to establish hierarchies at Bhandari Infotech by demonstrating that they were, in fact, working. A particular young man named Akash would often spend large amounts of time on his mobile phone at Bhandari Infotech, speaking to colleagues in an animated way about matters concerning his job. In an immediate sense this kind of performance could be read as an ostentatious attempt to highlight to those who were unemployed that he was not. Those who regularly witnessed these displays certainly suggested that was the case. One young man, for example, told me that 'he could go to his office to make these calls but it wouldn't have the same effect', and later explained that 'he [Akash] wants to be *seen* making calls'. But there were additional layers of meaning to this performance which are not appreciated from within that viewpoint. On one occasion I asked Akash how he managed to spend quite a considerable amount of time at Bhandari Infotech when he was clearly so busy. His reply was quite telling: 'This is my office,' he said in a cool, calm, and confident manner. On the one hand, this was meant as a joke, alluding to the widespread problem of absenteeism of government employees in the area. But on the other hand, it registered Bhandari Infotech as a site of work and productivity. For Akash, hanging out at Bhandari Infotech had shifting meanings: in one moment it was a site to relax, in another it was a place of work. His capacity to shift between these roles without moving was quite potent in a context where so many young men had to migrate for work.

The second set of young men similarly sought to demonstrate they had economic opportunities which other young men did not. But where the first set of young men more commonly sought to convey a sense of civility and calm, these young men were more frenetic in their comings and goings. The strategies of Anand, aged 25, were typical of this set of men. He had recently started assisting a friend who ran a chicken farm on the outskirts of town. His role was to go into town and coordinate daily deliveries of eggs to tea stalls and the like. He took orders and tried to increase the number of stores to which eggs from this farm would be distributed. Importantly, Anand was adamant that he himself would not deliver them, as he considered this too menial. By ensuring he did not work with his hands, he was able to tell others that he worked 'in sales'. This work demanded that he move around a lot and that he was always on his toes. When I asked him why he came to Bhandari Infotech to hang out, he took issue with how I phrased the question:

Hang out? Maybe some people have the time to hang out…I don't have the time. If I get a call then I go straight away. If not then I stop here only. You have seen each day that I am always coming and going…

In these comments Anand was explicitly distancing himself from notions of idling and instead emphasized his busyness. Another young man from this group said that 'I would come here every day for *chai* if I could', but that his work schedule would not allow for it. In an immediate sense these kinds of arguments alluded to how this set of young men's comings and goings hinged upon effective time management. But they also point towards the heterogeneous character of this space (cf. Langevang 2008) and how the meanings of Bhandari Infotech as a social space are contested by young men. For some young men it is a site of productivity, where they could work and be seen to be working. For Anand, it was a place of worklessness and relaxation, which he was unable to attend as often as he might like.

Even the first set of young men who came to Bhandari Infotech for breaks between their studies did not make sense of their presence strictly in terms of passing time. This set of young men were said to have the most free time, and were most commonly ridiculed by others for simply hanging around and idling (such as how Jaspal ridiculed Saurabh, described above). But that was not how they made sense of gathering at Bhandari Infotech. They would often come together to talk about what they had studied, share advice about what to expect in examinations, as well share study notes. Saurabh explained that this was one of the most important reasons why they came to Bhandari Infotech:

> We come here to see our friends, to drink chai and talk with them. Of course we do that. We also talk about things we have to do. In two months there are three of us who are going to Dehradun for tests. So we have lots organize. Not just for the examination itself, what will they ask, what is most important to study? Also how are we getting there, where is the building (for the examination), who are we staying with? These things…take a lot [of] time to organize…to prepare.

For Saurabh, time spent at Bhandari Infotech was a break from study, but can also be seen as a different kind of preparation. It was a place where he and his friends came together and enjoyed the presence of others, but certainly not one which they reported as wasting their time. So while it was true that these young men spent some of their time relaxing and joking around, much of it was also spent preparing and making arrangements for examinations in the near future. This served to transform 'hanging out' into a goal-oriented practice (cf. Masquelier 2013: 472). Even as these young men struggled to register a progression through time, they devised ways of punctuating and organizing time such that they considered themselves to be moving forward. This was potent in a context where migration is often said to be one of the few ways in which young men can realize social mobility and arrive at the markers that register their arrival at adulthood.

Young men rendering assistance to others

So far I have argued that these three sets of young men sought to demonstrate their productivity in subtle and strategic ways. But the most common and tangible way in which young men were productive at Bhandari Infotech was shared across these sets of young men. Bhandari Infotech had quite a steady stream of customers throughout

the day and most of the time Gaurav was able assist them himself. If he was moderately busy, customers would often sit on the bench seats outside and converse with the young men gathered there while they waited. But on some occasions young men who had the requisite skills and knowledge would assist customers with their enquiries. In these instances, divisions between the sets of young men were blurred, as were divisions between those who formally worked at the shop and those who simply helped out when needed. By helping out in these ways, young men were making a concerted effort to position themselves as productive young people within the community. It gave them the opportunity to demonstrate their respect for local hierarchies and norms by deferring to others—commonly their elders—and rendering them assistance.

Most commonly people needed assistance with navigating the internet. If they knew that Gaurav was busy, the young men would often halt their conversations to respectfully and politely greet people when they came in, and they would not wait to be asked by Gaurav to help out if they suspected he needed it. At times, this involved linking the Hindu notion of *seva*—understood as 'selfless service performed without expectation or reward' (Jakimow 2010: 553)—with their skills in digital literacy. These strategies also invoked patriarchal and paternalistic notions wherein young men were attempting to create ways of providing for others. Rakesh, a 24-year-old young man, for example, explained how he assisted others by helping them to navigate new technologies:

> Most of the time people come here to say they need help with a form. But the level of understanding is very low. If we say to them, 'which application are you wanting to complete?', sometimes they do not even know...they don't understand. Next thing we talk about what they want and we find out which form they are wanting to fill out. Bus tickets, bank account [forms]. Then we sit at the computer and show them: 'this is how you open the internet', 'this is how you find the website', 'this is how you print'. These things sound simple, for us they are. But actually for some people they are not. You have to understand that it's new here.

Although participants did not use the term *seva*, Rakesh argued that by coming to the shop people were able to see that there was an 'easier way of doing things' and he was able to render them assistance. Gaurav himself also routinely provided informal computer tuition at no cost to many of his customers, and he was adamant that if his shop was to be successful it had to offer services that were pertinent to those living nearby. These practices were pivotal in a context where unemployed young men are often ridiculed for not making good use of their time. Underpinning many young men's social practice, therefore, was an orientation of generosity and service towards others in the community.

While some of these young men were in a strong position to assist those who came to the shop, this is not to say that those who received their services necessarily displayed gratitude. On one occasion a young man named Rishubh translated a document from Hindi to English for an older gentleman. The older man read the contents of a handwritten letter while Rishubh typed it up on a computer before printing multiple copies of it. But at the completion of the task an argument ensued about what he had in fact written. The older gentleman did not trust that Rishubh had translated the

document honestly, and so waited for Gaurav to read it to confirm that he had. When Rishubh was subordinated in this way he declared quite angrily that he would not help out again. At this declaration his friends seized the opportunity to tease him. One of them said ironically that this was perfectly understandable for a man who is as busy as he is. Again, it was Jaspal who sought to deliver the decisive blow. He said that perhaps Rishubh had written a marriage proposal to older man's daughter, such was his desperation.

Differential capacities to render assistance to others were also an axis around which hierarchies among young men were sometimes rendered visible and forged. The first and third sets of young men tended to have a stronger grasp of English than those in the second set. They also tended to have better computer skills. In some instances this led to divisions of labour among those assisting customers. For example, on one occasion an older gentleman came to the shop needing assistance. Gaurav was not in the shop at the time and Akash had assumed responsibility for running it. However, Akash was on the phone when the customer approached, and so told Naveen, a young man from the second set of youth, to attend to him. The customer needed a letter typed and printed in English and Naveen did not have the capacity to write it. So Akash completed the task—while still speaking on the phone—and gave the letter to Naveen, who then gave it to the older man and accepted the payment. Throughout the encounter, Akash had placed the young man in a subservient position by directing him in what to do. This was not related to a difference in age as they were both 26 years old. Instead, Akash's capacity to command the other man in this way was contingent on his ability to speak and write in English, and his competence with computers. In some instances, this meant that Akash's presence was more valued by Gaurav and more valuable to customers; he was able to situate himself within productive relations more simply than was Naveen.

Reinscribing relations of educated respectability

Some of my initial enquiries into why young men chose to come to Bhandari Infotech rather than other places were not particularly fruitful. It was very common for young men to refer to its proximity to the hills. They said it was important to feel connected to the natural environment, in particular, the mountains. Gaurav himself regularly referred to Bhandari Infotech as 'a shop with a view' (of the mountains), which he said gave it a spiritual and distinctly *pahari* anchoring. At other times, young men said it was about realizing a degree of independence. All of the young men in this study lived with their parents, with their siblings in close proximity, and so hanging out at Bhandari Infotech meant getting away from their purview. They said that this was important because they did not have to justify their behaviour or actions to other people. In this sense, Bhandari Infotech was a site where they were able to define the contours of youth sociality on their own terms.

While each of these perspectives was important in a different way, none of them explained why they did not hang out to the same extent in other spaces in the local area. A few caveats must be inserted here. The young men in this article, particularly the second set of youth who worked informally in Pauri Town, did, of course, frequent other places. The nature of their work was such that they went to various places at various times of day. Similarly, those who had government contracts also spent time

at other places around town attending meetings and the like. Finally, the third set of young men occasionally patronized tea stalls and visited other friends' homes when they could. For these reasons, the extent to which young men gathered at Bhandari Infotech to the exclusion of other places must not be overstated. It is also important to recognize that socializing at Bhandari Infotech was not the only site where they gathered to 'let off steam'. I attended several weddings with participants in this study and it was common for young men to drink alcohol and smoke on these occasions. This offered a stark contrast to how they conducted themselves while at Bhandari Infotech. Even so, they were careful to monitor who saw them on these occasions, and usually consumed alcohol when they could control who was in the room when they did so. Notwithstanding these caveats, however, what was significant was that when each of these young men had 'free time', they tended to spend most of it at Bhandari Infotech.

Insights into why they did so were revealed when we discussed why they tended to limit the time they spent in other places in Pauri Town. One evening I asked a group of young men who were gathered at Bhandari Infotech whether or not they had spent much time at college since graduating. I asked this question in the context of upcoming student elections where many other young people I knew would regularly attend college to show their support for a hopeful student leader. One young man, Suresh, was quite outspoken on this topic:

> I completed my degree almost two years ago. Two years! Since then I have been busy doing different things…working. When I was a student, okay I would go, but now…I am not a student any more.

Like Suresh, another young man, Anoop, joked that if he were to go and hang out at college he would be likely to meet with ridicule: 'People would say 'hey *bhai*, what are you doing here? You want to come to class? Maybe you can write my paper also!' They suggested that hanging out at college was not feasible for young men who had earned their degrees.

However, most of the young men were less adamant about avoiding college than were Suresh and Anoop; for others, being seen in its proximity or hanging out with friends there was not the misdemeanour that Suresh and Anoop suggested it was. But there were important differences between how they made sense of spending their time at college as opposed to Bhandari Infotech. This was made apparent by Rakesh, who explained that he attended college quite regularly:

> Two weeks ago I went to [college to] see my old professor, he was my best teacher. Still I go to see him, these days we sit in his office. Before that I was there also to go to my friend's graduation.

For Rakesh, going to college quite regularly was appropriate, but it was important that he was going there for a purposeful engagement. He was not hanging out, but rather attending an appointment or function. He would choose to spend time in his professor's office rather than hang around with other young people. This contrasts quite significantly with why he said he came to Bhandari Infotech, which was more often to 'see friends', as well as to assist Gaurav with running

the shop when he could. What Rakesh's response and those of Suresh and Anoop share, therefore, is a sense that hanging around at college with no particular purpose is not suitable for youth who had completed their degrees. If they were to do so, their capacity to position themselves as productive young people might be curtailed.

Yet even while they did not want to hang out at college, they were keen to maintain their reputations as educated youth. This was particularly the case for the third set of young men, who were busy preparing for government examinations. In order to uphold their reputations as educated young men, they would avoid socializing with other young people who they did not think were serious about finding employment. On one occasion, I was walking through the town centre with an informant in the evening. We had been at Bhandari Infotech for the last few hours and were returning to his home for a meal. The results of the student elections had just been announced and a large celebration was taking place in the main street. There were over 200 young men parading down the street, and at the front of the procession the newly elected student leader was being carried on the shoulders of his supporters. I wanted to stop and observe but the young man I was with advised against doing so. He said:

> Come on, we have to go…These people are not wanting to bring change. They vote for a leader so now they can have a party, that's all. They say 'vote for us and we will give you alcohol'. How can we progress if this is the mindset of the people? No cars and trucks are coming and going now for the whole day. Taxis cannot even get through. [These people] are doing nothing, they are blocking development.

Most of the time there were not demonstrations of this kind in Pauri Town. But a similar line of reasoning underpinned most young men's attitudes about those who tended to gather regularly at tea stalls and the like. One young man suggested that the actions of young people who hang out in tea stalls are indistinguishable from older generations who are not educated:

> Go to the tea stall in the evening, near the vegetable market, anywhere…you will see lots of people there. Young people, they are sitting with drivers, couriers, they are all smoking, talking with each other…just passing time.

This young man's claim that there were others who were 'just passing time' was intended to deride youth who were idling and not 'serious', at the same time as it registered his own ways of socializing as productive. By hanging out at Bhandari Infotech, young men were physically separating themselves from youth without college degrees by avoiding the spaces where they were said to congregate. This argument represents a departure from analyses which show how a spirit of egalitarian camaraderie characterizes cultures of timepass (Jeffrey 2010). The young men in this study were forging youth cultures wherein dynamics of inclusion and exclusion mapped onto ideas about what it means to be educated or otherwise.

Rearticulating the value of rural space and rural futures

Being educated in Pauri Town and having not migrated was a position fraught with uncertainty. Young men regularly reported being unsure about what their futures held, at the same time as they resisted migration and critiqued people who had migrated in search of opportunities. At Bhandari Infotech they regularly spoke about their concerns, as well as the difficulties they had in navigating them. In this sense, Bhandari Infotech was an important refuge where young men could be reasonably well assured that they could meet likeminded people at various times of the day to discuss their predicament. Yet at the same time, young men's 'withdrawal' to Bhandari Infotech can also be read as an attempt to emphasize their connections with the world 'out there'. It was a site of connectivity and exchange that was firmly situated within—and not outside—broader flows and circuits of ideas, symbols, and capital (Marcus 1995). Locating themselves within currents of globalization was a vitally important way of investing their strategies with legitimacy and rearticulating the value of rural futures.

One of the most potent ways in which young men attempted to do this was by subtly critiquing dominant understandings of rural space that define it by what it lacks. Indeed, most young men who gathered at Bhandari Infotech performed masculinities in ways that were strikingly similar to what may be expected of white-collar employees in large urban centres (Deuchar 2019, 2021; Lukose 2009; Nambiar 2013). This was particularly the case for the first and third sets of young men, who often dressed in collared shirts and trousers. Even the second set of youth who did not dress in this manner would make efforts to present themselves in a particular way. They were less concerned with styles coded as fashionable among youth than they were with dressing in ways that signalled that they were older and more mature. Here there were clear connections with middle class imaginaries and masculine cultural forms that have been popularized in the Indian media in the wake of structural adjustment reforms (Fernandes 2006; Lukose 2009). Participants developed forms of bodily comportment and modes of dress that suggested their connections with enterprise cultures in metropolitan centres (Gooptu 2013). As with the strategies described above, they positioned themselves in this way in part to define social and cultural boundaries between themselves and other young people. But in a small hill town, these strategies can also be read as a subtle critique of discourses that work to define rural settings by what they ostensibly lack (Galvin 2013; Mathur 2015). Even though these young men resented the fact there were few opportunities for white-collar employment in and around Pauri Town, they acted as if they had already secured them, or as though they would be suitably positioned to occupy them should they become available. This marked Bhandari Infotech as a site that was brimming with potential and creativity, even if avenues for harnessing those capacities were not being fully realized.

Young men also challenged dominant understandings of rural space that position it as isolated by insisting that they were connected with processes at other spatial scales. This was especially the case when they discussed the skills they had developed and the content of the work they often performed at Bhandari Infotech. One young man, for example, contrasted the kinds of skills he had gained with those the villagers might possess. He said:

> Now you are coming here and to you I am speaking English, but if you go to the
> villagers they couldn't do this. Maybe one or two words only. If you ask them to

use a computer they of course would not know. Here we can do this…if you go to Delhi and ask for a job in there, then of course you have to speak English and know how to use the computer, typing and all…

This young man's suggestion, that he had developed skills that were useful in many places and similar to the skills people possessed elsewhere, worked to affirm his connections with urban India. Even while he stayed relatively immobile, it was significant that his skills and competencies 'travelled', that they would be recognized and valued in other settings, and that he could communicate effectively with people elsewhere.

This way of thinking about their own social practice was supported by other young men who discussed how their activities at Bhandari Infotech linked them with other places. One young man, for instance, referred to his use of the internet, and described how he spent large parts of the day talking to people in other countries. This young man had used social media to develop connections with friends in India but also parts of Europe and the Gulf States. Gaurav said that much of what he did connected people in different places. He did this not only by providing technologies requisite for navigating virtual (and transnational) space, but by facilitating the mobility of people from Pauri Town, as in the case of purchasing travel tickets on behalf of his customers.

There were, however, tensions among the young men in terms of their perceived commitment to rural futures. Those who were studying for government posts were sometimes ridiculed by the other sets of youth because they had made explicit their intentions to leave Pauri Town should they find suitable employment. From the perspective of the first set of young men, this was a cheap criticism to make; they suggested that those who made these critiques would also leave Pauri Town should they be offered a permanent government post, but that they would never be in a position to secure one. These kinds of tensions alluded to most participants' struggles living in Pauri Town and attempts to carve out a productive future within it. There were many occasions when they outlined the difficulties they were having and the worries they had. This was especially the case for those approaching the age of 30, who said that they were 'running out of time' to find a decent job and get married. Yet even so, while they did discuss feeling isolated and removed from major centres of business and commerce, and social and cultural opportunities, this was not the overarching way in which they made sense of living in Pauri Town. Instead, they configured ways of being productive within it by drawing on urban cultural forms (Deuchar 2019; Dyson and Jeffrey 2021), emphasizing their capacities and potential, as well as their connections with other places. Bhandari Infotech, then, was a site of connectivity and exchange where educated young people sought to articulate a productive presence and forge affirmative rural futures.

Conclusions

This article commenced with an anecdote that revealed some of the competing ways in which young 'non-migrants' are conceptualized in rural North India. On the one hand, youth are derided if they leave their villages because they are not able to help with agricultural work. On the other hand, those who remain are sometimes accused of not making good use of their time. I suggested that this places youth in a double bind: migrate from villages and contribute to the problem, or stay in villages and be

the problem. This article has sought to demonstrate the ways in which educated young men resisted these discourses by hanging out at a computer shop in North India and by insisting on their productive capacities. The central argument is that young men who socialized at Bhandari Infotech distanced themselves from notions of idling and created masculine youth cultures in which sought to situate themselves as productive young people. Hanging out at Bhandari Infotech, therefore, can be seen as a way of grappling with, rather than exemplifying, long-term unemployment, as well as a meaningful way of articulating affirmative rural futures. In this concluding section, I unpack the significance of this argument, and consider its implications for how scholars theorize youth sociality in rural settings across Asia and the Global South more broadly.

A number of scholars have attended to the dynamics of youth sociality in recent decades (Fioratta 2015; Langevang 2008; Patel 2017). Much of this work shares a commitment to foregrounding the productive capacities of marginalized young people. In line with these works, I have shown how educated, yet unemployed, young men drew on new technologies and developed skills while at the computer shop. They also assisted their elders and peers when they needed help navigating new technologies. In these ways, they were able to demonstrate to others that they were worthy and respectable youth. Yet even as these young men forged an orientation of service and generosity towards others, they simultaneously substantiated social divisions between themselves and uneducated people. This contrasts with the findings of some scholarship in South Asia and elsewhere that shows how young people develop friendships in sites such as internet cafes and tea stalls which at times bridge class, caste, and gender divides (Jeffrey 2010). Not only was Bhandari Infotech a decidedly masculine space, but being educated was almost a precondition for spending large amounts of time there. Thus at the same time as young men developed opportunities to showcase their productive capacities at Bhandari Infotech, they were also drawing social and cultural divides between themselves and others.

The activities of these young men have theoretical implications that extend beyond the immediacy of Bhandari Infotech itself. Thinking about the social production of Bhandari Infotech as a 'territorial appropriation' (cf. Langevang 2008) challenges dominant understandings of rural space that define it by what it is said to lack. The production of rural and peri-urban space in this analysis emerges as an ongoing process that is dynamic and contested. It was a site of connectivity and exchange wherein young men drew on new technologies and their educational credentials so as to develop modes of being productive (Joshi 2015; Koskimaki 2019). Their strategies complicate analyses which overdetermine the 'mobility imperative' faced by rural youth (Crivello 2011; Farrugia 2016; Punch 2015), and problematize the thrust of migration research which elides the agency of non-migrants (cf. Chea and Huijsmans 2018; Mains 2012). They also serve as a counterweight to analyses in the Indian context which detail the ways in which villages are changing or 'withering' without adequately exploring how youth engage with these processes (Gupta 2005). My findings largely cohere with those of Schut (2019) and others (Young and Jeffrey 2012; Koskimaki 2019; Kumar 2016) who emphasize how educated young people attempt to forge affirmative rural futures by drawing on their skills and competencies.

Yet where some scholars have shown how notions such as 'village uplift' inform young people's efforts to affect development in rural settings (Klenk 2010;

Koskimaki 2019; Schut 2019), such references were markedly absent among participants in this study. Many young men instead positioned themselves as though they were white-collar employees in large urban centres. Unpacking these practices helps to build new theoretical insights into how young people reshape the value and meaning of rural space. It was by drawing on urban cultural forms and emphasizing how they were connected with other sites that young men challenged understandings of rural space and legitimated the prospect of rural futures (Deuchar 2019; Dyson and Jeffrey 2021; Mwaura 2017). Their strategies highlighted what they shared with people in different locations and suggested their membership within middle class groups elsewhere. This was potent because it was a modality of emphasizing how they were situated within—rather than excluded from—broader currents of Indian modernity. My argument is not that educated youth were able to recreate rural space in unfettered ways—and it is not to deny the acute difficulties that youth face in this part of North India. But it is to draw attention to how young men who do not migrate attempt to create meaning in spite of their difficulties and how they rearticulate understandings of rural space in the process.

Attending to the ways in which educated yet unemployed young people navigate hardships in peri-urban and rural settings is set to become of increasing importance over the coming years. At the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is having unprecedented effects on the lives of young people in Asia and elsewhere. In the Indian context, large numbers of migrants have been compelled to return home and face incredibly uncertain futures. This is likely to draw even more attention to how policymakers and development practitioners are able to generate employment for young people in Uttarakhand, which has been the focus of much discussion for a number of years. It is my hope that future scholarship might aid these discussions by orienting attention to the agency of young people and inspire thinking about how their capacities might be harnessed. As I have shown in this article, young men in Pauri Town were at times able to generate subtle ways of being productive in a context where it was exceedingly difficult to do so, even as they reworked social inequalities. Giving more attention to their creativity, capacity, and potential is needed if a more inclusive and sustainable development trajectory is to be forged.

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