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**Thriving in the Present: the Politics and Poetics of Waiting and Hope  
of the Young Women of Delhi's Aspiring Middle Class**

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**Thriving in the Present: the Politics and Poetics of Waiting and Hope  
of the Young Women of Delhi's Aspiring Middle Class**

**by**

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## Abstract

### **Thriving in the Present: the Politics and Poetics of Waiting and Hope of the Young Women of Delhi's Aspiring Middle Class**

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For the young women of Delhi's "aspiring middle class," the concepts of "hope" and "waiting" play an important role in their experiences. The "politics," or structural factors, of waiting for the *concrete hope* of middle class-ness through economic advancement has led to the experience, or "poetics," of "stuckedness" as this supposedly inevitable future has not come to pass. Recently, a new politics of waiting – that of *abstract hopefulness* – has come about as an attempt to overcome "existential immobility." This government-distributed hopefulness, embedded in indeterminate time, has given the young women an idiom of enthusiasm in speaking of their pursuits. Using this time of "impasse," the young women participate enthusiastically in activities that give them personal fulfillment. In this way, I argue that the entangled nature of hope, waiting and temporality not only offers a means of interpreting their experiences, but also has allowed the young women to *thrive* in the present.

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## Introduction

The group of ten scholarship students sat in their usual semi-circle configuration listening to their teacher when I entered the classroom. In the middle of the announcement I was making, a precocious student interrupted, “Ma’am, why do you call us *ladies*? We’re *girls*!” as she perfunctorily outstretched her hand. Although this line of dialogue was not new to me in my time as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in India, I still asked, “What do you mean?” As the American coordinator of a Canadian-funded scholarship program for underprivileged young women in New Delhi, I believed I had certain values to uphold. For me “girls” held many connotations outside of age; I was chiefly concerned by its passivity. “Ladies,” on the other hand, meant responsible, active individuals at the helm of their education and their lives, or so I thought. “We call *married* women ladies. We’re still studying,” she clarified. Eventually, we settled on the title of “students,” but for a long time, I was unsatisfied with both the outcome (which is why I will refer to them as “young women” in the remainder of the paper) and the exchange. Why were my students – all high-school graduates well-rooted in their biological adulthood – not ready to progress in the way I thought they should?

Three years later, I sat in a Delhi Development Authority (DDA) *flat* waiting for the arrival of the same group. The tone of the door buzzer always managing to heighten my anticipation, I could hear my nervousness in the tentative ring of the bell. Had their time as ESL students helped them in their pursuits? Would this be a celebratory meeting? While I embraced each of the ten women as they crossed the threshold, the pile of shoes outside of the door growing, I hoped that our connection had not been lost over the two years that had passed since our last meeting.



As I had feared, our conversation began awkwardly as we exchanged the standard niceties (“How’s your mother? Is your brother still studying?”). Perhaps they were nervous about speaking in English with me after going so long without interacting with a native speaker. About half an hour into our spell of silence, which had only been broken by staccato, often one-word replies, one question finally struck the right chord. “Didn’t I see a picture on Facebook of some of you wearing saris on Teachers’ Day?” I asked. Soon the young women were jumping over each other to get a word in. “Yes, ma’am, I’m teaching at the Foundation School. I teach 4<sup>th</sup> standard.” “Me too. I am teaching English, ma’am.” “I’m also teaching but at a small private school.” “Ma’am, I’m working at a factory company.” With contagious energy, the young women went around in a circle telling me about the jobs they had landed since we met and the university programs they were pursuing through Delhi University’s School of Open Learning (SOL).

After a long succession of congratulations, the rhythm of the conversation began to change again. As the excitement subsided, the giddy descriptions transformed into more subdued responses. “Yes, I like it, but I’m thinking of changing. Maybe I can do a B.Ed. or maybe an MBA.” “I’m preparing for the Civil Service exams, ma’am.” Despite their seemingly stable positions, many of the women expressed more ambitious aspirations – all of which require considerable funds, time, performance and luck. Their acknowledgments of these conditions (e.g. “But there is a money problem.”) were tossed out almost as afterthoughts.

We said our farewells and the pile of shoes slowly dwindled, but afterwards a number of questions stayed with me: Were they hopeful about the future despite the barriers they were facing? And if so, why did they speak of their future dreams dispassionately? Given their enthusiasm for their current jobs and activities, why did they want to change? And if they wanted to pursue other goals, why wait? In the subsequent

conversations I would have with some of the young women from the group, the entangled nature of their future hopes and present realities would become more apparent. In fact in this paper, I argue that the entanglements of hope, waiting and temporality are critical not only to understanding their experiences, but they are also the tools the young women use to *thrive* – to grow and prosper on their own terms. Before attempting to disentangle their stories, I must present two constants that, while not always recognized or articulated, are central to the young women’s experiences: “hope” and “waiting.”

### FRAMEWORK OF HOPE AND WAITING

Vincent Crapanzano’s *Waiting: The Whites of South Africa* (1985) and Hirokazu Miyazaki’s *The Method of Hope* (2004) have been credited with launching the current work in the social sciences to uncover the epistemological efficacy of “hope.”<sup>1</sup> However, the proliferation of hope as a subject of inquiry has not only proved its potential as a method but also highlighted the challenges in establishing its delineating qualities. This is the subject of Crapanzano’s “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” which chronicles his search throughout social and psychological science along with non-academic literature for hope’s “discursive and metadiscursive range.”<sup>2</sup> Crapanzano found that, traditionally, explorations of the nature of hope, following a Euro-centric Christian model, have focused on the distinction between material and metaphysical hope, or “false hope” and “true hope” in the words of the biblical counselor, Wayne Mack.<sup>3</sup> Further, scholars like the 19<sup>th</sup> century essayist, Walter Pater, have attempted to draw a distinction between “desire” and hope with the latter at times considered to be the former’s

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<sup>1</sup>Jarrett Zigon, “Hope Dies Last: Two Aspects of Hope in Contemporary Moscow,” *Anthropological Theory* 9, no. 3 (2009): 253.

<sup>2</sup>Vincent Crapanzano, “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” *Cultural Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2003): 4.

<sup>3</sup>Crapanzano, “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” 8.

“passive counterpart” and at others to be its equivalent.<sup>4</sup> Crapanzano arrived at a Whorfian sense of hope, or being “embedded within historically and culturally specific understanding,” and related this with the “waiting-induced paralysis” to which hope led white South Africans in the final years of apartheid.<sup>5</sup>

The culturally embedded quality of hope remains a lasting legacy of Crapanzano’s formative essay. That said, attempts at establishing universally agreed upon characteristics of hope as an epistemological tool still continue. Similar to Crapanzano’s treatise, in “For a Relational, Historical Ethnography of Hope” Stef Jansen traced the discourse of hope in the framework of ethnographic inquiry.<sup>6</sup> In an effort to “initiate a move towards a degree of clarity” in specifying what is meant by the term “hope,” Jansen classified work done by scholars like himself as an examination of its “intransitive modality,” “hopefulness.”<sup>7</sup> This branch of hope refers to its affect, or its *abstract* modality, which can also take the form of its antithesis, “hopelessness.”<sup>8</sup> He then identified its “transitive” form, which has an object that a subject “hopes for / that.”<sup>9</sup> Here, scholars look at the *concrete* nature of hope, wherein one looks forward to something on the horizon.<sup>10</sup> This expectant outlook possesses an inherent link to a temporal gap – “waiting.”

While common perception might indicate otherwise, “waiting” for a future hope may or may not be an unengaged process. Gabriel Marcel, whose work is considered to be the antecedent to present-day studies on the subject, established the “range of waiting,” in

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 11-19.

<sup>6</sup>Stef Jansen, “For a Relational, Historical Ethnography of Hope: Indeterminacy and Determination in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Meantime,” *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 447-464.

<sup>7</sup>Jansen, “For a Relational, Historical Ethnography of Hope: Indeterminacy and Determination in the Bosnian and Herzegovinian Meantime,” 448-9.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 448-9.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 449.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 449.

which “inert waiting” inhabits one pole and “active waiting” the other.<sup>11</sup> In their introductory chapter to *Ethnographies of Waiting*, Andreas Bandak and Manpreet Janeja described Marcel’s idea of inert waiting as possessing “a general feature of confidence in the outcome or, at times, perhaps an indifference to it...without being particularly anxious about the outcome.”<sup>12</sup> They further clarified Marcel’s notion of “active waiting” as being one that “keeps open what is anticipated, and therefore entails hope understood as generative of action.”<sup>13</sup> Another way of understanding the idea of activeness is through the language of mobility. When one feels a “sense of going somewhere,” he or she experiences “existential mobility” in the words of Ghassan Hage.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, long periods of waiting from which one can see no way forward are not only characterized by stasis but also hopelessness, leading to “existential immobility.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, hope for the future is more likely to persist in active, mobile waiting.

The description I have presented reveals a long-held association between hope, waiting and the understanding of linear time. Key to the representation of the experience of the young women will be the need to problematize this assumption. While denying the existence of future-oriented waiting in the lives of the young women would be misleading, I will offer an alternative view in an attempt to undermine the prevailing claim that future hopes of middle class-ness have exclusive authority in creating the identity of aspiring middle class women. This myopic view leaves little space for the possibility brought about

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<sup>11</sup>Gabriel Marcel, “Desire and Hope,” in *Readings in Existential Phenomenology*, eds. Nathaniel Lawrence and Daniel O’Connor (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1967), 280.

<sup>12</sup>Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” introduction to *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, eds. Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Bandak and Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” 3.

<sup>14</sup>Ghassan Hage, “Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality,” in *Waiting*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Publishing, 2009), 97.

<sup>15</sup>Hage, “Waiting Out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality,” 97.

by their present pursuits, especially those that do not lie on the prescribed, future-oriented aspirational path. Zooming the lens out to examine how the young women view both the future *and* the present allows us to better understand the entangled nature of their various hopes. Between periods of waiting, despite the possibility of “impasse,” the young women carve out spaces wherein future hopes are overshadowed by endeavors in the present. In other words these gaps of time, thick with potential, allow for “not waiting” wherein they can hold on to proprietorship of the present and *thrive* as “girls.”

Introducing their rich collection of recent ethnographic records of communities who remain in states of waiting, Bandak and Janeja posited that the multivalent nature of Marcel’s range creates the space for a more nuanced view of the “politics” and “poetics” of waiting.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Marcel’s exploration of waiting and hope allows us to put the “structural and institutional conditions” that induce waiting and the “existential affordances” that occur during periods of uncertain waiting into conversation.<sup>17</sup> Bandak and Janeja’s borrowing of the division between politics and poetics from Clifford and Marcus is not unique to waiting,<sup>18</sup> and I similarly find these distinct but interconnected concepts relevant to my subjects’ context. Undoubtedly, the dominant structures and institutional factors that induce waiting, its politics, are of importance to the Indian context. However, of equal value to the work I will present is how the young women of the aspiring middle class give voice to the experience of this waiting, their poetics.

Waiting, understood as the “oscillations between doubting and hope,”<sup>19</sup> cannot be separated from the aspirations of the young women, but this hope does not possess a single

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<sup>16</sup>Bandak and Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” 3.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>18</sup>See for example Brian Larkin’s use of this dual framework. Brian Larkin, “The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42 (2013): 327-343.

<sup>19</sup>Bandak and Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” 5.

form. For members of the aspiring middle class, the path to upward mobility serves as the object of their *concrete hope*. The nature of the politics of waiting for this concrete hope and the poetics of the “existential immobility” that it brings in relation to future-oriented aspirations will be the subject of the first and second sections of this paper, respectively. The third section will look at examples of how *abstract hopefulness* has been disseminated by the current administration, in other words, the politics of hopeful waiting, which lacks temporality. Finally, the way the young women relate to and describe their present pursuits, for which they experience “existential mobility” by “not waiting” will conclude the paper.

As a final caveat, I must state that the binaries I have presented – politics / poetics, hope / hope(ful / less), waiting / not waiting, mobility / immobility – are at best contrived. As will become clear, these notions are inextricably linked and entangled. The essence of my exchanges with the women provides the backbone for my claims, and in lieu of a clear temporal beginning or end, their words offer an anchor in the entanglements I present.

## Politics of Waiting for Hope

The plan to meet at Alaknanda Market on that particular day proved to be fraught with misfortune. It was the Hindu festival of *Makar Sankrānti* and Samera, one of the young women I had invited for tea, was going to have to stay home to help her mother prepare food for the occasion. This meant her friend, Hajar, would also not be able to leave their neighborhood unaccompanied, so the plan was off. Having sped through her work, Samera called to tell me they would be able to come after all. I rushed out to grab a table at the casual but comfortable restaurant situated in the back of the market only to find that it had closed down since my last visit to Delhi. By then, they had arrived and we wandered for some time before finding a snack shop that had the right combination of seating and refreshments.

Already in the special sort of playful mood that comes from triumph over a protracted period of searching, we sat down to *cold drinks* while the sensible Samera and candid Hajar described their experiences as teachers at small non-profit schools. Samera began to chuckle as Hajar revealed the well-known secret behind why they both want to become government-school teachers: “Boys always want to be engineers and girls want to be teachers. We think those are good jobs.” We spent a great deal of time over the rest of our conversation in unpacking her statement’s intentional irony, a means of coping with the situation’s problems.

The young women recognize the difficult they face in the pursuit of government jobs due to the growing competition for public-sector work. Yet, each year a growing number of aspiring middle class members push their children to prepare for qualifying exams. How “hope” for such positions remains a factor is the subject of this section. To begin, it will be instructive to establish the nature of the hope of the unspecified “we” to

which Hajar referred. Therefore, this section includes an account of characteristics of their community's aspirations. To do so, a link will be established between the *concrete hope* their parents' generation holds for their children and the semantics of "aspiring" created by international and domestic organizations. This "conjured" hope of the "past futures" has led to a cycle of waiting for the young women in their aim to become government employees.

### **CREATING THE EMERGING MIDDLE CLASS**

A majority of my interlocutors are from a well-established urban village in south Delhi, which lies adjacent to the historical Tughlaqabad Fort from which the village gets its name (see Figures 1 and 2). However, virtually all of the young women were raised in rural villages outside of the National Capital Region (NCR) and moved with their families either for access to quality schools or for their fathers' and/or brothers' work opportunities. They are not alone in this urbanization. Recent estimates put urban migration figures in the new millennium in the seven digits, estimating at least a 31 percent urbanization rate.<sup>20</sup> Citing the findings of a report produced by the International Institute for Environment and Development in 2011, which correlates class size with rates of infrastructural investment, Tiwari et al. claimed that India's "Class 1" cities hold a majority share of public and private infrastructural resources, and "consequently attract more people seeking higher education or employment opportunities in modern, skilled, and capital-intensive sectors."<sup>21</sup> As a result of urban migration, members of the rural-to-urban "aspiring" (also known as "emerging") middle class have become important players in the city's expansion. Forming

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<sup>20</sup>Piyush Tiwari, Ranesh Nair, Pavan Ankinapalli, Jyoti Rao, Pritika Hingorani and Manisha Gulati, *India's Reluctant Urbanization: Thinking Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1.

<sup>21</sup>Tiwari et al., *India's Reluctant Urbanization*, 29.



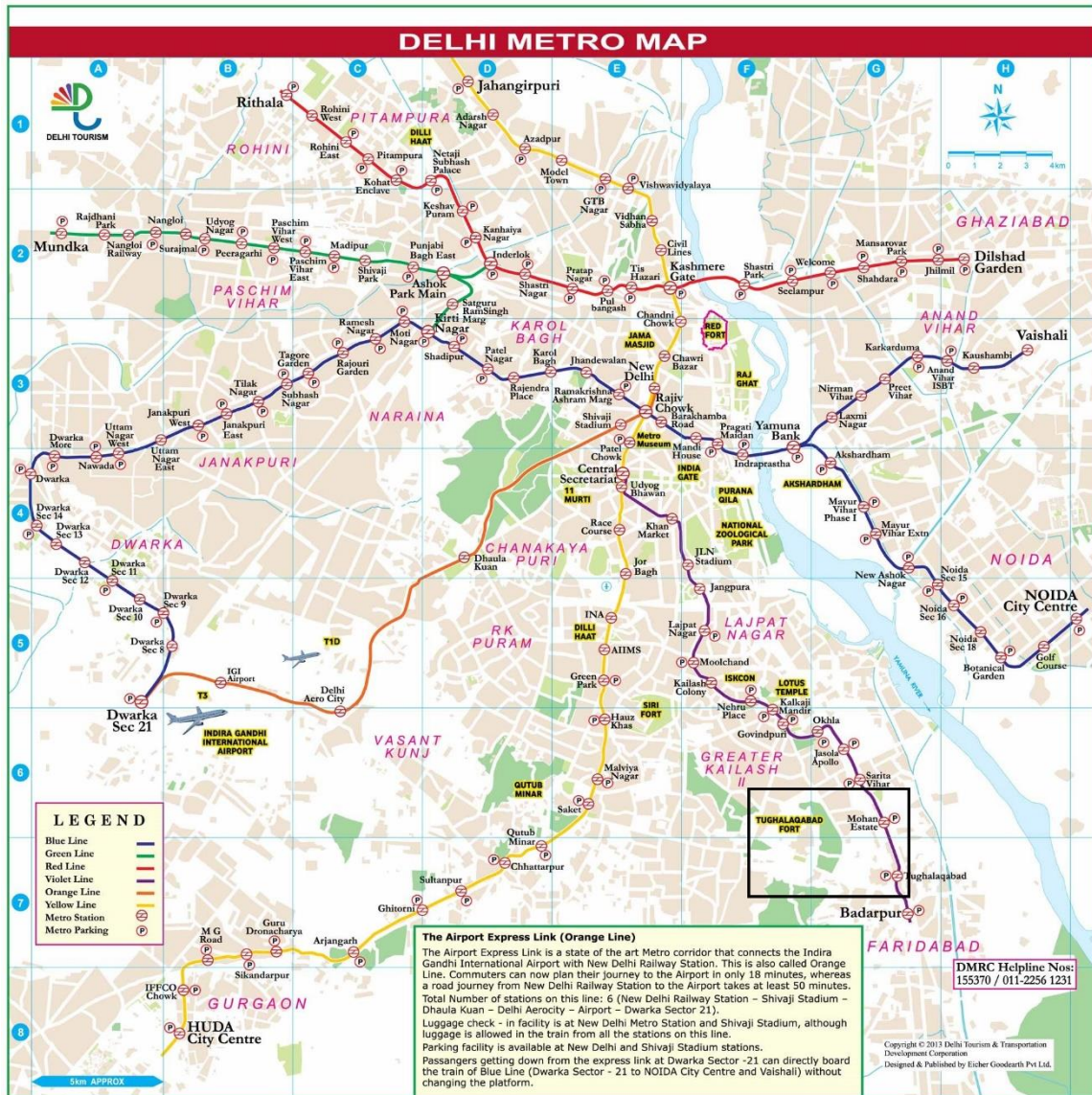


Figure 1: Delhi Map with Metro (Tughlaqabad Area Indicated)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>“Delhi Metro Map.” *Delhi Tourism Official Tourism Website for Government of NCT of Delhi*, 2013.  
[http://www.delhitourism.gov.in/delhitourism/images/metro\\_map.jpg](http://www.delhitourism.gov.in/delhitourism/images/metro_map.jpg).



Indian Middle Class” (200,000-1 million rupees).<sup>24</sup> Further, they projected that the middle class would reach 40% of the population by 2025.<sup>25</sup> The identification and touting of a growing, stable middle-class consumer market was paired with pressure for deregulations in various Indian markets as potential growth stimulators. In a 2001 report titled, *India: the Growth Imperative*, McKinsey & Company’s research arm, the McKinsey Global Institute, claimed that if the government were to fully enact the liberalization started in 1991 by eliminating its three main barriers – “the multiplicity of regulations governing product markets (i.e., regulations that affect either the price or output in a sector); distortions in the land market; and widespread government ownership of businesses” – India would reap the benefits of faster growth.<sup>26</sup> In other words, making the Indian economy more foreign-investment friendly would further enhance the attractiveness of India’s “favorable demographics.”<sup>27</sup>

Another aspect of India’s growth potential that Ghertner presented is the ubiquity of the dominant narrative of India’s economic boom. While impossible to cite a single source of the common narrative, Ghertner recounted the myth as “going something like this: India has historically been a poor country,...[but] in 1991, India began a gradual process of economic reforms, leading to a jump in economic growth for much of the 1990s and an additional boost in growth by the mid-2000s, which led it to surpass all other nations except China.”<sup>28</sup> Ghertner then offered a more nuanced understanding by questioning the equal dispersion of this growth citing “the rise in farmer suicides, the burgeoning

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<sup>24</sup>D. Asher Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-Class City Making in Delhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 30-33.

<sup>25</sup>Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics*, 30-33.

<sup>26</sup>McKinsey & Company, *India: the Growth Imperative* (New Delhi: McKinsey Global Institute, 2001), 1. [https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/global%20themes/india/growth%20imperative%20for%20india/mgi\\_the\\_growth\\_imperative\\_for\\_india.ashx](https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/global%20themes/india/growth%20imperative%20for%20india/mgi_the_growth_imperative_for_india.ashx).

<sup>27</sup>Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics*, 33.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

population of urban slum dwellers, the decline in per capita food grain absorption, and the persistence of high rates of stunted growth in children in India throughout the 2000s” as signs of the narrative’s falsehood.<sup>29</sup> Despite these well-documented facts, even those with a cursory familiarity with India can attest to the pervasive belief in this description.

As his title reveals, Ghertner’s argument is chiefly concerned with aesthetics of Delhi’s “world-class city” making project, but it is as much an argument for an imagined future, of progress.<sup>30</sup> The aspiration of a world-class city, “an idealized vision of a modern, privatized, and slum-free city assembled from transnationally circulating images of other so-called global cities,” is inherently a future-oriented imaging shared by the rich and poor alike.<sup>31</sup> Further the author pointed to the power of statistics in that “poverty projections, like all predictive models, are devices that organize thoughts, feelings, and actions by constituting fields for future intervention.”<sup>32</sup> This imagined future not only applies to the aesthetics of Delhi but also to the lives of the people who call the city home. As urbanization rates show, for many, the post-liberalization future is laden with the potentiality for economic growth, which lies just on the other side of the right opportunity. In this sense, financial betterment through stable, secure work represents a *concrete hope* for members of the aspiring middle class, the inevitability of which promotes, at times inert and at others active, waiting. Critical to the politics that dictate this waiting for the realization of growth potential is the reliance on future-oriented time, the imposition of which has long been established by structural social factors. An elaboration on the importance of the future’s place to the politics of waiting for the young women follows.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 24.

## HOPE IN FUTURE-ORIENTED TIME

Understanding the relationship between hope and time, while perhaps not widespread, is also not a new topic of inquiry. For phenomenologists like Eugène Minkowski, who evaluated hope and desire from within the structure of time, they both exist within a “mediate future,” which lies in the “zone” between the “immediate” and “remote future,” somewhere between activity and prayer (i.e. active and inert waiting).<sup>33</sup> Whatever distinctions have been made, religious and secular scholars have agreed that hopes reside in a place in the future. How near or distant, how effectively or ineffectively we pursue them – they are always just beyond.

Much after the phenomenological writings of Minkowski in the 1960s, anthropologists began to explore the nature of the future as it relates to individuals’ and communities’ “temporal reasoning.”<sup>34</sup> Borrowing from Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart’s notion of “historicity,” or “the manner in which persons operating under the constraints of social ideologies make sense of the past, while anticipating the future,”<sup>35</sup> Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen presented temporal reasoning as a way of orienting the role the future has played in ethnographic studies of hope.<sup>36</sup> The authors were most keen on the incorporation of the “ongoing social production of accounts of pasts and futures” as a means of anthropological inquiry.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the young women, they belong to a category of ethnographic inquiry, which David Zeitlyn termed “regimes of anticipation,”<sup>38</sup> which are “conditioned not only by past events, but also by past futures, including remembered hopes

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<sup>33</sup>Crapanzano, “Reflections on Hope as a Category of Social and Psychological Analysis,” 9.

<sup>34</sup>Nauja Kleist and Stef Jansen, “Introduction: Hope over Time – Crisis, Immobility and Future-Making,” *History and Anthropology* 27, no. 4 (2016): 380.

<sup>35</sup>Eric Hirsch and Charles Stewart, “Introduction: Ethnographies of Historicity,” *History and Anthropology* 16 no. 3 (2005): 263, quoted in Kleist and Jansen, “Introduction: Hope over Time,” 380.

<sup>36</sup>Kleist and Jansen, “Introduction: Hope over Time,” 380-382.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 380.

<sup>38</sup>David Zeitlyn, “Looking Forward, Looking Back,” *History and Anthropology* 26 no. 4 (2015): 390.

and fears.”<sup>39</sup> As we will see, in many ways the politics of waiting for the aspiring middle class’ “past futures” still influence the young women’s experience of waiting in the present.

The same afternoon sun that in the sweltering summer confines more fortunate Delhiites to the air-conditioned indoors shines more favorable on the less well-off in the winter. Near where we sat, sweepers and maids reclined on benches in the South Delhi DDA park along with students from a nearby, notoriously low-performing, college. Soaking up the sun on an afternoon like this, one can easily lose track of time. Fighting the temptation to do just that, I asked Numa, another sincere NGO teacher, if her older brother was thinking about getting married. She told me that “our family’s financial situation is not good, so my brother wants to get a bank job.” While she was implying that, in order for her family to find the best match for him, her brother needs an established, salaried position,<sup>40</sup> Numa’s comment is also indexical of its aspirant implications. Moving up the economic ladder is part and parcel of what it means to be a good family in a good position. What Numa revealed is her community’s shared belief not only in the potential to move up but also in the certainty of upward mobility through certain career paths. As will be shown in the section that follows, however, access to these paths are more often than not impeded by a number of factors. Having examined some aspects of the politics that have created a cycle of waiting for the concrete hope of the past futures of the aspiring middle class, I now turn to the experience, or poetics, of waiting that those politics have created. When this waiting becomes one in which no means for forward mobility are possible, the potential for “stuckedness,” or “impasse,” sets in.

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<sup>39</sup>Kleist and Jansen, “Introduction: Hope over Time,” 381.

<sup>40</sup>See Craig Jeffrey, “Timepass: Youth, Class and Time among Unemployed Men in India,” *American Ethnologist* 37 no. 3 (2010): 465-481.

## Poetics of Waiting in Existential Immobility

As I poured the *Thumbs Up* and *Limca* from the heavy glass bottles into the flimsy plastic cups, the young women began to lay out the various disappointments they were facing in their jobs as NGO teachers and their concerns over the education system in general. “Our English is not good, ma’am,” Samera emphatically stated. A matter of habit from my time as a teacher, I reminded them of how well they both spoke English, but they saw the issue not as one of being able to produce correct sentences but as one of knowledge in the language. “The books are all in *English*, so the students don’t understand anything. At least when we were in school, we understood everything in *Hindi*, but now they don’t even understand Hindi properly. We have to explain everything to them,” Hajar elaborated. This puts pressure on the NGO teachers to not only understand the basic grammar and vocabulary of English but also to have an in-depth knowledge of the content-specific language in their students’ textbooks.

English knowledge is one of the known indicators of middle class-ness in India, but there are others. As we have seen, the development of the anticipation of access to economic growth has been a wide-spread sentiment originating from development organizations and picked up in the pervasive discourse of economic prosperity. However, as will be discussed, these opportunities often did not materialize in the ways the families expected due to socio-economic barriers. Examining how the group has created its own “suitable” identity, especially related to women’s place in the “aspiring middle class,” reveals their need to maintain independent social norms outside of the lower and middle classes. This – combined with the emptiness of the aforementioned myth – has prohibited social mobility, which consequently creates an “impasse.”



## DEFINING SUITABILITY

As has been shown, externally manufactured economic characteristics for classifying who comprises the aspiring middle class have been appropriated by my young interlocutors. However, there are numerous internally developed social characteristics that have also influenced the community's idea of their place in the global city. On a different but related note to that of economic and development studies, the social sciences have also paid heed to the supposed growth of the aspiring middle class in order to understand the characteristics of this group. For instance, Mark Liechty has argued that in the case of Kathmandu's "new middle class," they face a "dilemma of reconciling their status as modernity's 'traditional' other with their desires to claim a legitimate place within 'modernity.'"<sup>41</sup> Similarly, given their "precarious position along two continua,"<sup>42</sup> Delhi's emerging middle class members have to negotiate their place in the ever-changing global city. This means that, while organizations such as McKinsey & Company have proposed the growth potential of the people that make up this sector, the members of this new (not quite) middle class must determine what the outcomes of that potential growth should look like.

The ideology of women's place in society plays an important role in the identity formation of the aspiring middle class. As Bhatt et al. have shown, "[the new middle class] positions itself as a cultural vanguard, claiming to be liberal, against caste, for women's empowerment, and secular, even when it supports the Hindu Right."<sup>43</sup> While Delhi's aspiring middle class may not have fully embraced all of the aspects of middle class social

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<sup>41</sup>Mark Liechty, *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 7.

<sup>42</sup>Liechty, *Suitably Modern*, 7.

<sup>43</sup>Amy Bhatt, Madhavi Murty and Priti Ramamurthy, "Hegemonic Developments: The New Indian Middle Class, Gendered Subalterns, and Diasporic Returnees in the Event of Neoliberalism," *Signs* 36 no. 1 (2010): 129.



normativity that the authors describe, the young women do feel that their families view their education and future employment as important aspirations. At the same time the young women's fathers prefer that their wives work in the home as "housewives,"<sup>44</sup> which might appear to be a contradiction. However, given the urban village's proximity to affluent south Delhi neighborhoods, aspiring middle class members specifically draw the distinction between women who work in their own homes versus women who are required to work as domestic help in the apartments and houses of the more affluent. In other words, emerging middle class families are relatively better off than those families who have to rely financially on the women of the household. Considering many women after arriving in Delhi from the rural village likely needed to work menial jobs to make ends meet, men earning sufficient salaries to support their families' needs would be a step towards middle-class prosperity.

That said, there are limits to how near middle class-ness the families are willing to come. Liechty's text *Suitably Modern* examines the experiences of Nepalis who, moving toward liberal ideals that distinguish them from the lower classes, still maintain a "suitable," not too liberal posturing.<sup>45</sup> Similar ideas would often emerge in subtle ways during my discussions with the young women. When I asked her about the pollution problem that was plaguing Delhi to the point of international infamy, Numa, an avid bus-taker, blamed middle-class consumerism purporting that wealthy car owners were too self-absorbed to take public transportation. Similarly, later in the conversation, she also referred to the "uneducated people" who reside behind her urban village whom she claimed cause security problems for her neighborhood. In this way, my interlocutor was careful to carve

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<sup>44</sup>For instance, Minu, whose story appears in "Politics of Hopeful Not Waiting," expressed her father's dismay that her mother had to get a job in a bakery due to his poor health.

<sup>45</sup>Liechty, *Suitably Modern*.

a space for her principles between the uncaring, consumption-driven middle class and the unenlightened, lawless lower class. It is clearly important to Numa and her community to establish a separate, in-between space for themselves – one that is contingent upon the desire to pave the way for a better life for the younger generation. However, the reasons for this may be rooted in a means for dealing with physical and “existential immobility.”

### WAITING IN STUCKEDNESS

Returning to Kleist and Jansen’s notion of “temporal reasoning,” the authors highlighted a category of historicities that examine “what happens when frameworks of modernist progress are ever less available in practical terms but when the temporal reasoning that animates them remains a key factor in the making of people’s hopes.”<sup>46</sup> This is the primary subject of Lauren Berlant’s work, *Cruel Optimism*, the idea that the act of hope or desire for an object becomes an impediment to one’s ability to thrive.<sup>47</sup> In the text Berlant, introduced her take on the “impasse” as “a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward.”<sup>48</sup> An impasse, when involving action, has an unproductive sense: “a holding station that doesn’t hold securely but opens out into anxiety, that dogpaddling around a space whose contours remain obscure. An impasse is decompositional—in the unbound temporality of the stretch of time, it marks a delay that demands activity.”<sup>49</sup> Inherent to impasse is its hopelessness wherein there is no apparent means of attaining one’s object of desire or hope.

Relatedly, in his essay, “Waiting out the Crisis: On Stuckedness and Governmentality,” Ghassan Hage made a case for the “proliferation and intensification”

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<sup>46</sup>Kleist and Jansen, “Introduction: Hope over Time,” 381.

<sup>47</sup>Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>48</sup>Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 199.

of “existential immobility,” or a feeling of “stuckedness,” being experienced during the current period of neoliberal precarity.<sup>50</sup> He contrasted this both with “existential mobility,” “a sense that one is ‘going somewhere,’” and with “social (im)mobility,” which is related to what has commonly been referred to as socio-economic upward mobility.<sup>51</sup> This calls back his earlier research on Australian politics in *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, in which Hage argued that neoliberal governments are unable to equally distribute “an *experience* of the *possibility* of upward social mobility.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, without state-distributed hopefulness, a people or a segment of society can collectively become subjected to stuckedness. This can happen even to the more affluent sectors if they lack existential mobility – especially when they compare themselves to the seemingly mobile other.<sup>53</sup>

This certainly relates to the experiences of the aspiring middle class who are plagued by the prescribed need to move forward, to progress, but lack the means to do so. Of particular relevance to the young women and their families is Ghertner’s claim that projections of inevitable financial growth have fallen short of anticipated outcomes. Ghertner, taking a cynical stance, claimed that intentional “statistical trickery” on the part of organizations such as McKinsey and the NCAER are very much in partnership with the Indian government “to conjure the image of an upwardly mobile future,” a fabricated image that he shows to be false.<sup>54</sup> Using the work of economist Utsa Patnaik as a starting point, Ghertner argued that the Indian government’s Planning Commission abandoned its system of “direct observation” in establishing poverty lines in its annual National Sample Survey (NSS) and instead applied a consumer price index adjustment as a method of “indirect

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<sup>50</sup>Hage, “Waiting Out the Crisis,” 97-106.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 97-99.

<sup>52</sup>Ghassan Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society* (London: Merlin Press, 2003), 13.

<sup>53</sup>Hage, “Waiting Out the Crisis,” 99.

<sup>54</sup>Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics*, 31.

estimation.”<sup>55</sup> This misrepresentative method has “rendered invisible more than a half billion people who did not eat enough food every day” and has created what Ghertner has termed India’s “poverty myth.”<sup>56</sup> As Hage has shown, people like the young women, anachronisms masked by the myth of social mobility, can easily become existentially immobile.

Samera and Hajar believed that their perceived lack of English knowledge prevented them from passing the entrance exams that would move them toward their goals of becoming government school teachers. Certainly, cost was also a major factor given that the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programs’ tuition can add up to 1.5 or 2 *lakh rupees* (\$2,300-3,000), or about 70 times their current monthly salaries. While they might be able to study enough English for the exam and take tuition loans from family, more general “exposure” proved to be more problematic. “We don’t go daily for classes, so we don’t know as much as they (i.e. full-time students) do,” Hajar lamented in reference to the limited time they spend on campus as School of Open Learning students. Compared to regular, likely more affluent students, a lack of mobility, which would allow them to be on more equal footing with their competition, was a major barrier to passing the entrance exams for the B.Ed. program. In other words, their less mobile place in society perpetuated their stuckedness.

If we simply label their situation as lacking hope and the young women as dithering in a state of impasse, their description of a suitable in-between (i.e. not too middle class) lifestyle could be seen as a façade to mask feelings of hopelessness brought on by immobility.<sup>57</sup> Or worse yet, it could be said that the choice to strictly adhere to suitable

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 34-36.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 34-42.

<sup>57</sup>This is the argument Ghertner makes for the *jhuggi* (slum) dwellers who accept and replicate the language of “nuisance” related to their slums as a means of joining the “community of sense.” In other

principles binds them to this in-between rung rendering them immobile. Perhaps both of these possibilities possess some viability, but this is only one of the aspects of their poetics. While Samera and Hajar focused more on the barriers that they experience by living the lives their parents want for them – pursuing “secure” government school teaching jobs – there remained an element of hopefulness in their waiting for, often unspoken, *concrete hopes* (e.g. a better paying job to come along so that they can afford B.Ed. programs, someone to pay for their program, more exposure to English, etc.). Just as the experience of being somewhere between actual, economic betterment and non-access cannot be captured qualitatively through poverty-projection models, neither can it be explained simply through a single point of future reference. To better understand the other side of the young women’s poetics, I will first present the political context by which *hopefulness* is being created.

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words, by describing themselves as “filthy,” they earn a seat at the table of discussions of world-class city making. Ibid., 125-157.

## Politics of Hopeful Waiting

By the time I had finished paying the auto rickshaw driver, Minu had already come to meet me near *Pīr Bābā Mandir* (*pīr* being a Sufi spiritual leader and *mandir* the term for a Hindu place of worship). Perhaps to avoid my waiting on the road, she had rushed down from her second floor apartment to retrieve me as soon as I called. She led me through a small, neat alley dodging children wrapped in home-knit sweaters and hats bolting from doorstep to opposing walls and back. Minu offered me a seat on the *dīvān*, or daybed, in the front room, which we entered through the gated doorway. Minu told me that her family had just purchased the flat and remnants of the blessings bestowed upon the new home, a string of lime and chilis, still hung on the doorpost.

Like most, if not all of her peers Minu expressed her hope of gaining entry into the public sector (in her words “to get a government job”) a grueling process marked by multiple exams. However, Minu’s situation differs from that of the other young women. Although in the midst of taking public-sector qualifying exams, unlike her friends Minu clearly articulated that public-sector work is the aspiration of her mother whereas her personal goals lie elsewhere. “Yes, I will prepare for the exams and I will try to get a government job. But I will do social work also. I *must* do this work.” Part of her desire to be in the social sector is rooted in her faith in the government’s ability to provide for its citizens. “There are so many government schemes. I want to be able to help people find the right one. We also didn’t know about them until someone told us.”

In this section, I will show how the distribution of the affect of *abstract hope* has been a priority of the current Indian administrations. Through his “positive to progressive” rhetoric, Prime Minister Narendra Modi claims that future hope can be earned by the youth’s hopefulness and by the promotion of women’s rights. At the same time, an

important aspect of *abstract hopefulness* is its disentanglement from future time. The way in which the government has attempted to harness the public's goodwill by creating an atmosphere of hopefulness follows.

### **CREATING PROGRESSIVE INDIA THROUGH ENTHUSIASM AND WOMEN'S PROGRESS**

On the many occasions that I have conversed with young members of the aspiring middle class, I have been struck by their ability to always be, or at least sound, hopeful. According to Hage, this form of hopefulness, or positivity, when equitably distributed by the government has the potential to shape a nation.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps in a tacit recognition of the power the distribution of hopefulness can create, the Modi administration has certainly made great efforts to highlight the potential of *hopeful waiting* in its public relations. The Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) swept the 2014 national and state-level elections running on the platform of ousting the former, "corrupt regime" and of restoring public faith in the Indian government. This method proved to be extremely effective and dealt a devastating blow to the incumbent Congress Party, which was left scrambling for a political foothold in the country.<sup>59</sup>

After his party's victory, Prime Minister Modi implemented a number of country-wide initiatives and concomitant public relations campaigns. While the initiatives themselves have had mixed success, the corresponding PR campaigns have led to, if not outright success, at least a great deal of public awareness. Indicative of this was a friend's comparison of Modi to *Cāṇakya*, a historical figure whose political prowess has been credited with helping establish the *Maurya* Empire, as a way of calling attention to Modi's carefully crafted image and political shrewdness. In a display of his outreach acumen,

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<sup>58</sup>Hage, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*.

<sup>59</sup>Samantha Subramanian, "The Stunning Results in India's Elections." *The New Yorker*, May 16, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-stunning-result-in-indias-elections>.

Narendra Modi began a public awareness radio program titled “*Man kī Bāt*” (“What’s on My Mind” (literally “Mind’s Thoughts”)) in October of 2014.<sup>60</sup> In this monthly *All India Radio* program, Modi reminds the country of national accomplishments and major events from history along with highlighting his points of pride and vision for the country.

Recently, Modi has used this platform to promote the idea of “positive India” under the premise of reminding the country of its successes. Following his request to his listeners in the November 2017 installment to send in their positive stories and accounts,<sup>61</sup> Modi began his December 2017 “*Man kī Bāt*,” the last of the year, with a discussion of the importance of positivity and the enthusiasm brought by India’s youth:

और आज अपनी इस ‘मन की बात’ में, मैं 18 से 25 वर्ष के ऊर्जा और संकल्प से भरे हमारे यशस्वी युवाओं से बात करना चाहता हूँ। मैं इन्हें ‘New India Youth’ मानता हूँ। New India Youth का मतलब होता है - उमंग, उत्साह और ऊर्जा। मेरा विश्वास है कि हमारे इन ऊर्जावान युवाओं के कौशल और ताकत से ही हमारा ‘New India’ का सपना सच होगा। जब हम नए भारत की बात करते हैं तो, नया भारत जो ये जातिवाद, साम्प्रदायवाद, आतंकवाद, भ्रष्टाचार के ज़हर से मुक्त हो। गन्दगी और गरीबी से मुक्त हो। ‘New India’ - जहाँ सभी के लिए समान अवसर हों, जहाँ सभी की आशा-आकांक्षाएँ पूरी हों। नया भारत, जहाँ शांति, एकता और सद्भावना ही हमारा guiding force हो। मेरा यह ‘New India Youth’ आगे आए और मंथन करे कि कैसे बनेगा New India। वो अपने लिए भी एक मार्ग तय करे, जिनसे वो जुड़ा हुआ है उनको भी जोड़े और कारवाँ बढ़ता चले। आप भी आगे बढ़ें, देश भी आगे बढ़े।

aur āj apnī is “man kī bāt” mẽ, maĩ 18 se 25 varṣ ke ūrjā aur saṅkalp se bhare hamāre yaśasvī yuvāō se bāt karnā cāhatā hū̃ | maĩ inhẽ ‘New India Youth’ māntā hū̃ | *New India Youth* kā matalab hotā hai – umang, utsāh aur ūrjā | merā viśvās hai ki hamāre in ūrjāvān yuvāō ke kauśal aur tākat se hī hamārā ‘New India’ kā sapnā sac hogā | jab ham nae bhārat kī bāt karte haĩ to, nayā bhārat jo ye jātivād, sāmpradāyavād, ātaṅkavād, bhraṣṭācār ke zahar se mukt ho | gandagī aur garībī se mukt ho | *New India* – jahā̃ sabhī ke lie samān avasar hō, jahān sabhī kī āshā-ākāṅkshāē pūrī hō | nayā bhārat, jahā̃ śānti, ektā aur sadbhāvanā hī hamārā *guiding force* ho | merā yah *New India Youth* āge āe aur manthan kare ki kaise banegā *New India* | vo apne lie

<sup>60</sup>Narendra Modi, “Man kī Bāt, Part 39,” *All India Radio*, address, December 31, 2017, accessed February 1, 2018. <https://www.narendramodi.in/hi/mann-ki-baat>.

<sup>61</sup>Narendra Modi, “Man kī Bāt, Part 38,” *All India Radio*, address, November 26, 2017, accessed February 1, 2018. <https://www.narendramodi.in/hi/mann-ki-baat>.



bhī ek mārg tay kare, jinse vo juḍā huā hai unko bhī joḍe aur kāravā̃ baḍhtā cale |  
āp bhī āge baḍhē, deś bhī āge baḍhe |

And today in this “*Man kī Bāt*,” I wish to address our energetic and determined 18- to 25-year-old successful youth. I consider them to be the “New India Youth” – meaning aspirational, enthusiastic and energetic. I believe that it is only through our enthusiastic youths’ aptitude and talent that our dream of a “New India” will be realized. When we speak of a “New India,” may it be free of casteism, communalism, terrorism and the poison of corruption. May it be free from filth and poverty. “New India” where all may have access to equal opportunities, where everyone’s hopes and aspirations may be fulfilled. “New India” where peace, unity and trust may be our guiding forces. I call my “New India Youth” to come forward and shape the makeup of “New India”| Let the “New India Youth” choose the path, take along those to whom they are connected, and let the caravan move on. For as you move forward, so does your country.<sup>62</sup>

In this way, Narendra Modi equated the notions of *ūrjā* (power, energy), *saṅkalp* (intention, resolve) and especially *utsāh* (strength, effort, enthusiasm, zeal, morale) with what will enable the country’s march toward progress.

This takes central importance later in the speech in the counsel he drew from a Sanskrit *śloka* (“उत्साहो बलवानार्य, नास्त्युत्साहात्परं बलम् | सोत्साहस्य च लोकेषु न किञ्चिदपि दुर्लभम् || utsāho balavānārya, nāstyutsāhātparn balam | sotsāhasya cha lokeṣu na kincidapi durlabham ||”).<sup>63</sup> Using the aphoristic verse to evoke the gravity of his claim that “for a person filled by positivity and enthusiasm nothing is impossible,” Modi shared the “positive stories” sent in by his listeners.<sup>64</sup> He then linked their stories to the core of his message that positivity paves the way to progress:

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<sup>62</sup>Modi, “Man kī Bāt, Part 39,” December 2017.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid.

ऐसे अनेक लोग हैं जो अपने-अपने स्तर पर ऐसे कार्य कर रहे हैं जिनसे कई लोगों के जीवन में सकारात्मक बदलाव आ रहा है। वास्तव में, यही तो 'New India' है जिसका हम सब मिल कर निर्माण कर रहे हैं। आइए, इन्हीं छोटी-छोटी खुशियों के साथ हम नव-वर्ष में प्रवेश करें, नव-वर्ष की शुरुआत करें और 'positive India' से 'progressive India' की दिशा में मजबूत कदम बढ़ाएँ।

aise anek log hāi jo apāne-apāne star par aise kāry kar rahe hāi jinase kāi logo ke jīvan mẽ sakārātmak badalāv ā rahā hai | vāstav mẽ, yahī to 'New India' hai jisakā ham sab mil kar nirmāṇ kar rahe hāi | āie, inhī choṭī khuṣiyō ke sāth ham nav-varṣ mẽ praveś karē, nav-varṣ kī śurūāt karē aur se kī diśā mẽ majbūt kadam baḍhāē |

The people on their own terms are engaging in such [positive] activities are the ones who are having a positive impact on many people's lives. In reality, this is the 'New India' that is being constructed by us all together. Come, let us take these small tokens of happiness and ring in the *New Year* and take confident steps from 'positive India' to 'progressive India.'<sup>65</sup>

Modi went on to praise the *utsāh* of the women of Jammu-Kashmir who have remained hopeful in the face of persistent violence and linked their story with the promotion of women's rights. Ultimately, he concluded that, along with positivity, it is through those rights that the country can move forward and progress:

विश्वास से कहता हूँ और ये मेरी दृढ़ मान्यता है कि भारत की विकास यात्रा, हमारी नारी-शक्ति के बल पर, उनकी प्रतिभा के भरोसे आगे बढ़ी है और आगे बढ़ती रहेगी। हमारा निरंतर प्रयास होना चाहिए कि हमारी महिलाओं को भी पुरुषों के बराबर समान अधिकार मिले, समान अवसर मिले ताकि वे भी प्रगति के मार्ग पर एक-साथ आगे बढ़ सकें।

viśvās se kahatā hūi aur ye merī dṛiḍh mānyatā hai ki bhārat kī vikās yātrā, hamārī nārī-śakti ke bal par, unkī pratibhā ke bharose āge baḍhī hai aur āge baḍhtī rahegī | hamārā nirantar prayās honā cāhie ki hamārī mahilāō ko bhī puruṣō ke barābar samān adhikār mile, samān avasar mile tāki ve bhī pragati ke mārg par ek-sāth āge baḍh sakē |

I confidently say, and it is my firm belief that India's development journey has moved forward and will continue to move forward on the strength of our women's

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid.

power and on the backs of their talent. Our continuous effort should be that our women may also get the same rights as men, the same opportunities, so that as women they are also able to move ahead together as one on the path of progress.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly, Prime Minister Modi equated the language of enthusiasm and positivity with the country's progress, but this relationship also holds a unique temporal quality, to which I now turn.

### HOPEFULNESS IN INDETERMINATE TIME

In his complex but illuminating article on plural temporalities, David Zeitlyn made a distinction between categories of “conceptual time” and “experiential time.”<sup>67</sup> Citing scholarship that deals with intertwined temporalities, he proposed that “causation across time, how the past affects the present, how the future may affect present and the past,” offers a more accurate representation of both history and anthropology.<sup>68</sup> Zeitlyn referred to Henri Bergson's concept of “*la durée*” (“duration”), or the subjective, experiential form of time, which encompasses the idea of different temporal intensities, rates and scales, as being a nonconformist version of plural time.<sup>69</sup> To restate Bergson via Zeitlyn, how time actually passes should be viewed from the perspective of the experience of the person who waits.

In the case of the young women, both the notions of entangled temporalities and experiential time can be instructive. With the demand for government jobs constantly rising and the minimum cut-off score increasing each year, Numa was understandably concerned that she had not passed her latest exam. While the overall endeavor is divided into a set

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Zeitlyn, “Looking Forward, Looking Back,” 383-384.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 381.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 394-395.

number of steps, with exams scheduled on fixed dates throughout the year, it is still impossible to calculate how long the process of becoming a government employee will take for a number of reasons. To begin with, there is no guarantee of success. “When will you know your results?” I asked. “We don’t know exactly - maybe in April or May.” Yet another outcome of fluctuating demand, test administrators cannot (or do not attempt to) accurately predict the completion of the grading process.

Further, despite the stereotype that Indians excel at *cracking* exams, the nature of the test itself is problematic for predicting results. “Ma’am the main problem is the GK (General Knowledge) section. History and all we can learn, but who knows what they will ask in the GK and we don’t have good exposure.” The perceived lack of good, or the right kind of, exposure appears here again, but in this context it adds to the growing list of reasons that the young women are not able to determine the amount of time it will take from when they decide to actively pursue government employment and when they can expect to be hired. Numa spoke of the potential for impasse, or the experience of existential immobility, which she faces in pursuit of the hope of passing the entrance exams, a crucial step toward getting a government job. Specifically, when speaking of a future-oriented goal, such as passing a specific exam, one senses a stuckedness.

However, this is not the only temporality the young women experience. In their introduction, Bandak and Janeja not only reiterated the pervasive nature of waiting especially in the context of the Global South, but they also emphasize the necessity of understanding how waiting “forms action, thought and social relationships [acquired] in diverse engagements in, and with, time.” For the young women like Numa, the long period of waiting for a government position is broken up by gaps of indeterminate number and length in which the progress toward their ultimate aspirations are put on hold. Therefore, as Numa’s situation demonstrates, when evaluating this specific group of women living in

this designated experience, we have to suspend the prevailing understanding of linear time and consequently question the, fraught but presumed, relationship between hope and waiting.

Even as international corporations and the government seek to put Indian life on a timer, anyone who has sat in Delhi traffic or waited for a local bus can attest to the incalculable, fluid nature of time in the Indian context. For this reason, the more precisely one tries to predict the arrival of a future hope, the more problematic maintaining hopefulness becomes as its endpoint approaches.<sup>70</sup> Narendra Modi's hesitance to put a timeline on when progress through equality will be reached reveals this as well. Modi's language of *utsāh* and positivity resonates closely with the notion of *abstract hopefulness*. But this hopefulness does not point to any specific moment in the future for which one should wait. While he implies in his speech that the future "progressive India" will be realized sooner through a positive attitude and constructive actions, by using the subjective, speculative tense (which I have translated into English as "may"), Modi offered an indeterminate time, which is not demarked linearly but experientially.

In other words, as Zeitlyn also challenges us to ask, if life for Delhi youth has always been dictated by "liquid,"<sup>71</sup> incalculable time, can we demarcate the present from the future in the same way? And if not, does the future begin to lose its hegemonic hold? In the final section, we will see how the young women, in lieu of determinate time, have clung to acts of "not waiting" as a means of maintaining agency.

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<sup>70</sup> Although his discussion avoids the affective aspects of hope in favor of its epistemological features, this idea is key to Hirokazu Miyazaki's notion of "indeterminacy." Miyazaki claims that as one approaches the object of hope (in the context of gift giving), hope loses its vibrancy, but when the object's reception is indeterminate hope prevails. Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

<sup>71</sup> See Bendixsen and Eriksen's study of Palestinian irregular migrants who are held in a pattern of waiting for legitimate refugee status in Norway. Synnøve Bendixsen and Thomas Hylland Eriksen, "Time and the Other: Waiting and Hope among Irregular Migrants," in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, eds. Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018).

## Poetics of Not Waiting for Existential Mobility

After I complimented Minu on her fish tank, she explained, “Our friend told us that if we keep nine fish, it will be good luck. I don’t know if it is true, but yes, we’ve been lucky.” In addition to the purchase of a new home, her comment on good fortune may have been in reference to Minu’s recent success as an administrator at a well-funded NGO where she had excelled in her role. Despite her clear affinity for the social sector, Minu had left her job to prepare for her last exam. Having just completed the most recent paper, in response to the idea of her doing fieldwork for her Masters in Social Work through some of our mutual connections, Minu told me, “I’m free *now* to do fieldwork, ma’am” – meaning until she knew the results of her exam she could not move forward with the pursuit of that hope. In other words, Minu saw the present, indeterminate time as a way to explore her personal interests.

As we have seen, the politics, and even poetics, of waiting for future hope in the lives of the young women have implied forms of stasis – both existential and physical. Waiting, from the point of view of being passive recipients of promised hopes of economic growth and middle class-ness have led to a sense of existential immobility and impasse. However, as Minu’s words show, the young women I interviewed have no interest in being rendered immobile. While the current administration’s “positive,” hopeful rhetoric might offer a shared idiom that adds justification for their endeavors, they have made periods of waiting their own. To offer further insight into the young women’s circumstances, I will bring their situation into conversation with the ideas of those who have similarly observed the potential of the present in their fields. Therefore, I will now look at the notion of “not waiting” as has been proposed by Anne Allison to understand the young women’s belief in the potential of their present.

## DEFINING LIVING IN THE HERE AND NOW

As my recent gathering with the group of former students showed, they all were actively engaged in various ventures – however temporary in nature. In fact, the activities they were pursuing often did not have much potential for the future; either they would need to abandon these pursuits for new ones or for family responsibilities. This sense of indeterminate temporariness is heightened by the precarious nature of the neoliberal times in which we live. Scholarship on the topic of the potential of the uncertainty brought about by neoliberalism has not gained much popularity. While notions of “endurance,”<sup>72</sup> “perseverance,”<sup>73</sup> and “passing time”<sup>74</sup> in this heightened period of precarity have received some attention in the fields of hope and waiting, a great need still exists for the exploration of *thriving* in the precarious present.<sup>75</sup>

One of the notable exceptions is the ethnographic work of Anne Allison on elderly and middle-aged Japanese attendees of seminars sponsored by organizations that prepare people for dying alone. In her chapter in *Ethnographies of Waiting*, Allison provides the concept of “active not waiting” to make sense of her interlocutors’ actions.<sup>76</sup> Acknowledging the play on “active waiting,” which scholars like Hage have used to describe “those attempting to survive amidst the precarity of poverty, warfare or the displacement of citizenship/home,” she contrasted the two notions as having different temporal points of reference.<sup>77</sup> Active waiting, as has been shown, deals with moving

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<sup>72</sup>Hage, “Waiting out the Crisis,” 97-106.

<sup>73</sup>Zigon, “Hope Dies Last: Two Aspects of Hope in Contemporary Moscow,” 253-271.

<sup>74</sup>Craig, “Timepass: Youth, Class and Time among Unemployed Men in India,” 465-481.

<sup>75</sup>At least where human beings are concerned. Anna Tsing offers the proliferation of matsutake mushrooms in places of seclusion as an example of survival in the wake of the destruction brought about by neoliberal times. Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: on the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>76</sup>Anne Allison, “Not-Waiting to Die Badly: Facing the Precarity of Dying Alone in Japan,” in *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty*, eds. Andreas Bandak and Manpreet K. Janeja (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2018).

<sup>77</sup>Allison, “Not-Waiting to Die Badly,” 183.

toward a hoped for future; “active not waiting,” on the other hand, “pitches the person more to the present.”<sup>78</sup> Based on this temporal association, Allison described the practice of deriving “joy” (her term) in the present from “acknowledging and preparing for [the] prospect” of “dying all alone.”<sup>79</sup>

Clearly the literal context of the young Indian women differs from that of the elderly Japanese, but like Allison’s subjects they also “live in the here and now.”<sup>80</sup> While on a different scale and intensity than those of the aging Japanese, the young women also choose not waiting as an alternative to their own future inevitabilities, an idea that calls for further exploration. Elucidating the work of the Public Feeling group to which she belongs, Ann Cvetkovich’s book, *Depression: a Public Feeling* in part “approaches [Berlant’s] impasse as a state of both stuckness and potential, maintaining a hopefulness about the possibility that slowing down or not moving forward might not be a sign of failure and might instead be worth exploring.”<sup>81</sup> Cvetkovich looks at the concept of “creativity” as a “form of movement...that maneuvers the mind inside or around an impasse...[and that can] take the form of literal movement and are thus more e-motional or sensational or tactile.”<sup>82</sup>

In this way, Cvetkovich’s subject of creative projects in times of impasse (“depression” in her case) is in parallel with the young women’s manner of living in the here and now. Instead of being overwhelmed by “not moving forward” (i.e. not becoming “ladies”) the young women also attempt to explore this period “creatively.” In fact, in this impermanent period, they attempt to *thrive* in the present. Like Cvetkovich suggests,

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<sup>78</sup>Ibid., 183.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>81</sup>Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: a Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 21.

<sup>82</sup>Cvetkovich, *Depression: a Public Feeling*, 21



*thriving* cannot be separated from mobility – including both its physical and existential variants with one often serving as the catalyst for the other. As I will show, in the context of the young women, embracing the here and now means not only holding on to the present in the face of future inevitabilities but also specifically finding the mobility to do so through the potential that immobility has created.

### NOT WAITING IN NOW-TIME

Walter Benjamin, a virtuoso of the esoteric, offers us the idea of “*Jetztzeit*,” or the “presence of the now”<sup>83</sup> (literally now-time), as an alternative to “empty homogenous time.”<sup>84</sup> Benjamin used now-time as a critique of how the idea of “progress” had been used as a source of promoting the “infinite perfectibility of mankind...that automatically pursued a straight or spiral course.”<sup>85</sup> He showed that, in the case of revolutionary action and rhetoric, revolutionists used past glory, “charged with the time of the now...[and] blasted [the past] out of the continuum of history.”<sup>86</sup> In Benjamin’s view, the present is full of potential for interpretation, as opposed to merely being a stop on the linear march forward.

As the title of his essay makes clear, Benjamin’s description of “*Jetztzeit*” was derived within the context of history – the past. His descriptive term “blasting” is particularly apt in revealing the vulnerability of the present to the, at times violent, influences of the past. However, in the context of the young women, the empty space of their now-time has been disrupted not only by unfulfilled “past futures” of middle class-ness but also by their inevitable futures. This means that, facing, on the one hand, the

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<sup>83</sup>As translated by Harry Zohn.

<sup>84</sup>Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 261.

<sup>85</sup>Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 260-261.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 261.

possibility that the path to economic growth does not exist for them and, on the other, that their futures – becoming “ladies” – can and will happen, they choose the potential that now-time creates.

Not only this, but they also harness the precarity created by the past and future to define their own present. While the young women’s pursuits varied, they all possessed two similarities: they were “suitable” activities such as teaching or administrative office work, and they could/should be abandoned easily in the event that their parents wanted them to pursue a different path such as preparing for entrance exams or getting married. Further, the young women spoke of their jobs or studies with positivity and unrestrained enthusiasm. Minu’s words, “I’m available now,” show that in a period of waiting, dictated by the political, social structures, she enthusiastically chose to take proprietorship of the potential of her present. However, at the same time, that potential moves her no closer to middle-class aspirations as doing non-governmental social work will not open the door to a government job. What are we to make of her actions?

One way to view her poetics is that, to avoid the possibility of existential immobility by trying to move forward, Minu can create existential mobility by moving in the space/time she inhabits. In other words, the stuckedness that she and the other young women experience from their need to maintain suitability for their futures as daughters(-in-law)/wives/mothers and from the requirement to strive for economic betterment allows for a suspension of future temporality. In this suspension, we can detect the existential mobility they experience on a superficial level by listening to their language of enthusiasm. Perhaps more telling, however, are the examples of physical mobility that they exhibit.

The other women similarly were using their experience of now-time to stave off immobility. In the case of Numa, this took a very literal shape. With great pride, she showed me her bus pass. The materiality of the object was of note: sized to fit in a wallet, her photo

situated in the top left corner of the laminated card. The cost of the monthly pass, more than \$12, made a significant dent in her budget, but she confidently told me, “I can go anywhere with this.” Further, her salary, although meager, granted her other existential mobilities. When I asked Numa how she liked to spend her money, she told me that, after her first purchase of a (mobile) phone, she started buying things for her family. “We never celebrated my mother’s birthday before,” but after she started earning money she threw her a party. “I don’t have to ask anyone for anything,” Numa stated as a point of both pride and relief.

While Samera and Hajar had expressed frustration not only in reference to their future hopes but also with their current jobs, they similarly were aware of the freedom their salaries afforded them. When I asked them how they would be going to the book market they had planned to visit, Samera said, “We usually take autos,” a practice they had started after working. “My mom hates when I buy books, but I use my salary, so she doesn’t get mad anymore,” Hajar laughingly explained about their coming expedition to the market. Although it is tempting to see these examples as modest, and we might wonder how long the effects of their existential mobility might last, these examples show that looking through the lens of now-time offers a view of their present time as “girls” as a period of *thriving*.

## Entangled Conclusions

As members of the “aspiring middle class,” the predestined recipients of the *concrete hope* of presumed economic growth through Indian liberalization, the young women find themselves in a precarious position. Middle class-ness offers the means to security (e.g. stable income, prestige), but the markers of middle class-ness can only be achieved by middle class resources (e.g. money, know-how). Further, the Indian leadership’s current language emphasizes the need for *abstract hopefulness* perhaps in an effort to mask or bridge the emptiness of development’s assurances. It could, therefore, be posited that “suitability” for the aspiring middle class (in direct contrast to the impoverished and actual middle classes) will become contingent not only upon results like having a job as a government school teacher, but also upon speaking about aspirations with gusto. Layering on the language of *abstract hope* by speaking enthusiastically about future aspirations might give the semblance of forward movement. However, while the young women certainly ascribe to this idiom, a holding pattern of indeterminacy cannot be sustained indefinitely; even though enthusiasm may be high now, eventually the “corrosive effects” of prolonged waiting will set in if the position of the members of the aspiring middle class remains static.<sup>87</sup>

Writing on the “affective turn” Cvetkovich states that for *Public Feelings* “especially important has been models for the depathologization of negative feelings such as shame, failure, melancholy, and depression, and the resulting rethinking of categories such as utopia, hope, and happiness as entwined with and even enhanced by forms of negative feelings...[*Public Feelings*] ultimately resists reductive binarisms between...positive and negative affect...it rethinks distinctions between positive and

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<sup>87</sup>Bandak and Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” 6.

negative feelings so as not to presume that they are separate from one another or that happiness or pleasure constitutes the absence of elimination of negative feeling.”<sup>88</sup> In other words, it should not be taken for granted that for the young women, being entangled in the disappointment of the “past futures” and in the ambivalence toward their pending future can heighten their sense of the urgency in the present.

While much emphasis has been paid to the multivalent “range of waiting,” hope still tends to be associated with polarities – transitivity / intransitivity, hope / hopelessness. Until we pay more attention to the nuances of hope, “the ambivalences, uncertainties, doubts and intensities,”<sup>89</sup> the acknowledgement of the potential of the precarious present remains lost. Worse yet, the widely-accepted belief that one must be hopeful for the future to be successful renders many, who do not have access to future hopes, voiceless.<sup>90</sup> Instead of accepting this narrative, the young women use their present for pursuits that allow them to *thrive* – to experience a fulfilling existence – by not waiting to arrive anywhere at all.

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<sup>88</sup>Cvetkovich, *Depression: a Public Feeling*, 5-6.

<sup>89</sup>Bandak and Janeja, “Worth the Wait,” 25.

<sup>90</sup>See Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

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