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# Timepass and Boredom in Modern India

Chris Fuller

- *Timepass: Youth, Class and The Politics of Waiting in India* by Craig Jeffrey

The expressive Indian English word ‘timepass’ means ‘killing time’ or an activity to do so. It is a fairly recent coinage, which first appeared in academic publications reporting research done in the 1990s.<sup>[1]</sup> *Timepass* was the title of the memoirs of Protima Bedi, a model and dancer, published in 1999.<sup>[2]</sup> A study of Indian English records it as common in journalism by around 2000, especially in Hindi-speaking areas.<sup>[3]</sup> Indicatively perhaps, Upamanyu Chatterjee’s *English, August* – a modern classic of boredom and killing time in India – was first published in 1988 but ‘timepass’ does not appear in the text, even though the hero Agastya and his friends are young, educated, middle-class people from Delhi who might be expected to use the word a lot.<sup>[4]</sup> Though only a guess, these scattered pieces of evidence suggest that ‘timepass’ was coined around 1990, probably in one of India’s metropolitan cities, since when it has become a common word across all or most of the country.



A lot of timepass is a preferably enjoyable way of using up relatively short periods of time, so that chatting to friends, playing games, watching television or going to the cinema would all be examples of ‘doing timepass’. The word generally carries the connotation that the activity, even if harmless, is neither serious nor productive, because it is merely intended to kill time and ward off potential boredom, so that, for instance, ‘timepass’ films or TV programmes are just silly or mindless entertainment.<sup>[5]</sup> ‘Timepass’ enjoyment at a religious festival, however, may be seen as deplorable.<sup>[6]</sup> Sometimes, too, the word ambiguously connotes immorality, as it does when Mumbai students distinguish

‘timepass’ male-female relationships, which are short-term and intended for sexual gratification, from platonic ‘*bhai-behen* [brother-sister]’ relationships or ‘true-love’ ones that imply long-term commitment.<sup>[7]</sup> The little evidence that exists suggests that timepass as an identifiable activity, as well as frequent usage of the word, is most widespread among urban youth, who spend time in all the usual ways – cinema-going, chatting to friends, etc. – but also through the distinctively urban activity of ‘hanging out’. For middle-class young men and women with money to spend, India’s major cities now offer plenty of modern cafés and other sites, such as shopping malls, in which to hang out in both single-sex and mixed groups. But all over urban India, in smaller towns as well as big cities, there is also a lot of hanging out by groups of young men – though not young women – who are not well-off and have masses of time to kill because they are unemployed. Young men of this kind are the principal subjects of Craig Jeffrey’s book *Timepass*.<sup>[8]</sup>

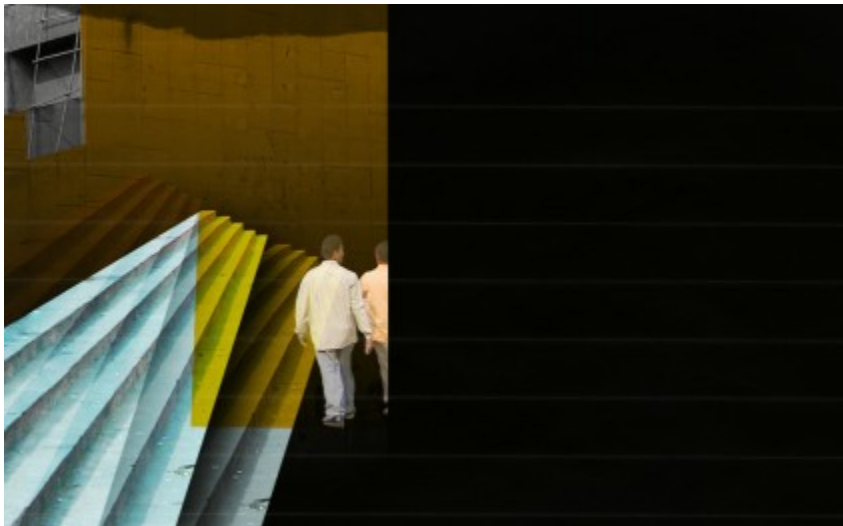
Jeffrey’s book encourages reflection on the topic of timepass, as well as on boredom in India. In Tamil speech, the English word ‘bore’ is widely used as an adjective, so that, for example, people say that some person or place or thing is ‘*romba bore*’, meaning that it is ‘very boring’; this usage has been current for several decades at least. ‘Boring’ is sometimes said by younger people, but is much less current than ‘bore’, and the word ‘boredom’ is never heard. Nor do people use ‘bore’ to describe themselves as bored, although Tamil colloquialisms such as ‘I’m hitting flies’ convey that meaning. However, in Hindi and Telugu, for instance, describing oneself as bored is possible and there may be considerable variation among Indian languages. ‘Bore’ probably entered as a loanword because Indian languages lack terms that directly translate the relevant English ones, but I do not know when this occurred.

In English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, ‘bore’ as a noun denoting something boring dates from 1766, but ‘boredom’, for the state of being bored, appears only in 1852. This recent chronology is always mentioned in literature about the modern development of boredom, which progressively displaced melancholy, the malaise of earlier centuries. Boredom, in other words, is a symptom of modernity and although the older French and German words, ‘ennui’ and ‘Langeweile’, carried rather different meanings, these tended to converge with that of English ‘boredom’ in the nineteenth century.<sup>[9]</sup> If boredom is a product of history, it is also a reasonable assumption that it is socially and culturally variable, as an excellent discussion of boredom among Australian Aborigines demonstrates.<sup>[10]</sup> Inferring new mental states or subjective experiences from the emergence of new words or ways of speaking is, of course, unwarranted. Nonetheless, the recent coinage of ‘timepass’ and its current usage are indirect evidence that in contemporary India a new discourse has emerged about forms of malaise connected to the passing of time which did not exist, at least in the same way, in the past.

Boredom is experienced in relation to modern clock time. Time drags because it seems to pass much more slowly than the clock or calendar says it should. The ‘traditional’ time of pre-modern India is different, however, and Nita Kumar, who worked among artisans in Banaras in the 1980s, has captured it as well as anyone. Banaras people, she says, are notorious for their unpunctuality and never care about waiting. But that is not

because ‘time has no importance for these people. It is rather that time is too important; it cannot be sacrificed for this or that purpose arbitrarily; it has to be lived to the full, every bit of it ... There is no hurry, no sense of time slipping or flying by, or rushing by like a stream: there is no such thing as “time”. It is not an external that controls you. It is inside you in that it is a way of feeling. The way you feel, what you are moved to do, is what time it is.’<sup>[11]</sup> At first glance, the Banaras artisans’ outings and recreations look like old-fashioned forms of timepass. But they are not; not only is timepass about time dragging, rather than flying by, but more crucially it is about time as pointless, external and controlling – which is exactly the opposite of the traditional sense described by Kumar.

Jeffrey carried out research in Meerut, a provincial city not far from Delhi, and his book focuses on educated, unemployed young men and rich farmers from the Jat caste, which is locally dominant. Much of Jeffrey’s argument is about caste, class and politics and he makes a significant contribution to South Asian political anthropology. Since timepass as such occupies only chapter 3, my discussion does not consider the book as a whole. Jeffrey mainly worked with male students in two of Meerut’s university colleges in 2004-5. He describes the colleges without being judgemental, but no reader could fail to see that they represent an educational disaster. In the Meerut colleges (which are far from unique), politics, mismanagement and corruption are endemic. Thus, to cite just two examples, in 2004-5, students campaigned for the right to cheat in examinations, arguing that cheating was so widespread that it was unfair to punish anyone for indulging in it. But even this absurdity paled before the action of a college registrar in 2006, who saved some money to pocket by subcontracting the grading of postgraduate dissertations to students at other institutions – not only to undergraduates, which was common practice in the region, but even to schoolchildren.



Young men enrol in large numbers in these dysfunctional colleges to acquire the degrees needed to apply for salaried jobs, mainly in the government and public sector. Young

women, on the other hand, are usually sent to college to improve their marriage prospects, not to try to qualify for employment, but Jeffrey was mostly unable to work with them. Unfortunately for graduates, the number of jobs is dwarfed by the number of applicants – sometimes several thousand apply for a lowly government post – and success is almost unattainable anyway without having the right political connections and paying large bribes. As a result, the vast majority of graduates cannot get jobs. A minority return to their family farms, which they regard as demeaning, but many enrol for another degree in the hope that it will improve their employment prospects. Some stay on for years, acquiring several BA and MA degrees and even a PhD, and then, still unemployed, they continue to live in a college hostel, spending their time completing job application forms, doing a bit of part-time work, engaging in student politics, and hanging out on and around the campus with other young men in the same predicament. All these activities, as well as much of the pointless studying they may do, are forms of timepass.

Many male students, says Jeffrey, see themselves as ‘surrounded by an expanse of featureless time’ (p. 76) which somehow has to be killed with distractions. They are chronically bored in their unfulfilling educational environment, but also feel left behind in provincial Meerut, where signs of India’s new global modernity are sadly absent. Almost all students look for ways of killing time, but those who had failed to get middle-class jobs and remained in higher education for long periods talked most often, usually forlornly, about timepass. A common form of timepass is hanging out in small groups with other young men, for example at the tea shops on the edge of the college campuses. There they trade stories, gossip, argue about sports, films and the news, drink tea and smoke cigarettes, enact mock fights and get into real ones, lounge around watching the world go by, crack jokes, leer at young women and sexually harass them. Most female students naturally try to avoid these male groups and justifiably complain that timepass is ruining the colleges; young women do not indulge in activities classified as timepass because, it is assumed, women never have idle time to kill. Like similar forms of sociality among young men elsewhere in the world, timepass in Meerut also ‘offered young men a feeling of fun, social worth and lower middle-class masculine distinction’, and sometimes hanging out even provided useful information and contacts, while also tending ‘to reproduce gendered forms of power’ (p. 101).<sup>[12]</sup> Timepass, in other words, functions socially to form a distinctive, class-based, male youth culture in Meerut.

Yet the negative aspects of timepass are overwhelming: a chronic feeling of loss caused by educational disappointment and persistent joblessness, which in turn delays young men’s marriages, and a strong sense of indefinite waiting in unstructured time that means that many men ‘had come to imagine themselves occupying a semi-permanent condition of limbo’ (p. 177). Timepass for them is not a short-term activity to deal with a tedious patch; rather, it is both a response to and an expression of an interminable boredom dominating their subjective experience and shaping their very being. Among young men in Bangalore hoping to find work in the booming information technology sector, timepass is similar, though somewhat less chronic.<sup>[13]</sup> Comparable, too, is the situation in Bhilai where the school-educated sons of workers in the steel plant regularly wait for years hoping to get a job. Some of them study for degrees but ‘the vast majority have time on

their hands'. Time is killed by playing card games or the local numbers racket, for example, but these young men also drink a lot and some become involved in crime or violence.<sup>[14]</sup> Almost certainly, these forms of timepass and boredom are prevalent among millions of educated, unemployed young men throughout India. Educated unemployment has long existed in India, but it has been worsening significantly since the 1970s; it is a new problem for the families of many young men trapped by unemployment, because their fathers or grandfathers typically looked after family farms or worked as peasant agriculturalists or labourers, and did not aspire to white-collar or factory employment that they could not secure.

Timepass, as we have seen, is normally about killing time by doing something that is neither serious nor productive, but it varies in duration; it may connote short-term activities or relationships or it may describe semi-permanent limbo. Hence 'timepass' covers a considerable semantic range. It is a familiar notion among the group of south Indian Tamil Brahmins with whom Haripriya Narasimhan and I have been doing research, but they are much more fortunate than the Jats studied by Jeffrey. Some of our oldest informants still live in their ancestral villages, where they own land, but the majority of men are graduates with well-paid professional jobs, as are significant numbers of younger women. Most of them live and work in Chennai, in other Indian towns and cities, or overseas, especially in the United States. None of the young men in this Brahmin group suffer like their compatriots in Meerut, so that for them timepass is normally about dealing with short-term boredom. Yet whether life is boring ('bore') or not often crops up in conversation when people talk about differences between the places where their family members and relatives now live.

Thus Dharmi, a landlord's wife, and Raji, his sister, who are both in their sixties, were talking about the contrast between themselves and their children and grandchildren. Dharmi has spent her whole life in her native village, but two of her married sons live in Chennai and the third is in the US. Raji lived for many years in Mumbai where her husband was a company manager, but after he retired they moved to Chennai and regularly spend time in the village; they have one son and one daughter, both married and living in the US. The two women said that they are used to village life and when Raji visits the village, she is content to stay there following her usual routines. Indeed, villagers like Dharmi and Raji, or their husbands, can often be found sitting around in houses or on their verandas just chatting, reading a newspaper or watching the world go by. From time to time, some village residents – men more than women – complain about being bored. Yet monotony does not consistently provoke boredom and complaints about it are by no means universal. Villagers are just as likely to say that they enjoy the peace and quiet and can easily pass the time by talking to friends, relatives or neighbours, visiting local temples, reading, or watching television, which has become a habitual pastime for many people, especially women addicted to Tamil soaps. Men quite often walk around village streets and chat in public places, whereas women usually do so in houses, and conversational groups are often, though not always, segregated by gender. Conversation, or the free-and-easy opportunity for it – albeit usually with the same people – plays a vital role in ensuring that rural life is not boring for many villagers of

Dharmi and Raji's generation. In all these respects, their attitude to time and its passing closely resembles that of Kumar's Banarasi artisans.

Both Dharmi and Raji agreed, too, that they felt cramped in small urban flats, but what villagers also dislike is the feeling of being 'tied up', as one elderly landlord with a son in Mumbai put it in English – that is, not being able to move around freely or drop into conversation with familiar passers-by. In another conversation, Dharmi said that the living space she hates most is the huge house in Chicago's outer suburbs where her son lives with his wife and child. Dharmi's husband – in a phrase often heard from men with children in America – described the Chicago house as a 'luxury jail', because from Monday to Friday they are left alone in the house, unable to go out because the housing estate is miles from anywhere else and they cannot drive a car. Some of our elderly informants, especially women who can better occupy themselves indoors, like visiting the US, but many do not. For Dharmi and her husband, like a lot of Tamil Brahmins of their generation, village life is preferable to city life, but the intolerable boredom of the American suburbs is worst of all.

For Dharmi and Raji's children and grandchildren, however, villages tend to be dull and boring, so that when they come to visit, said Raji, it is necessary to organise visits to other relatives, go on tours to visit temples and other sites, arrange special rituals and otherwise ensure that there is plenty of entertainment, because otherwise everyone complains after two or three days that there is nothing to do. Actually, not all urban visitors feel the same way. Young children often enjoy visiting their grandparents in novel surroundings and some men wax lyrical about rural peace and quiet. But urban women and older children do generally dislike villages; women say they are confined to the house obliged to do chores, observe tiresome rules about ritual pollution and indulge in dreary gossip, and youngsters complain that they lack their friends – and their computers – to play with, and that watching television with an erratic electricity supply soon becomes tedious. Children brought up in America may add complaints about physical discomfort as well.

None of this is likely to be surprising. City-dwellers everywhere find rural life boring, people accustomed to spacious accommodation dislike small flats, and virtual house arrest in America's suburban sprawl would be mind-numbing for almost anyone. Clearly, though, these various experiences of boredom did not arise for Indian villagers until emigration began; the people HariPriya and I studied started to migrate to urban areas in large numbers in the 1960s or 1970s (although many other Tamil Brahmins became urban migrants much earlier) and overseas migration was rare until the 1990s. Moreover, although the urbanites describe – and probably experience – being bored in villages much as modern westerners might do, boredom for Dharmi, Raji and other people of their generation appears to be inverted, because it is experienced more strongly in cities than villages.

Yet this apparent inversion may be misleading. Boredom, writes Elizabeth Goodstein, 'is first of all an urban phenomenon. Contemporary proclamations about the idiocy of rural life notwithstanding, boredom with provincial existence is a secondary phenomenon:

Madame Bovary's heart belonged to Paris. The experience emerged not out of a surfeit with the rhythmic repetitions of life in pre-industrialized society but in response to the superabundance of stimulation, the superfluity of possibilities for personal achievement, the sheer excess of transformation, offered by the modern city'.<sup>[15]</sup> Obviously, Chennai or Mumbai is not Paris and a Tamil village is not a French small provincial town, so that the lessons of Flaubert's nineteenth-century novel – 'the epic of modern boredom'<sup>[16]</sup> – cannot simply be translated to contemporary India. Moreover, the 'rhythmic repetitions of life' are far less evident in Indian villages or old cities like Banaras than once they were. But that is precisely the point. Thus in villages today, capitalist agriculture is ruled by continuously active commodity markets as well as the seasonal cycle, many villagers commute to nearby towns for nine-to-five jobs, and television schedules structure the day as much as temple worship timings. Television, indeed, 'is implicated in extending industrial "clock time" beyond the workplace' in India, according to Arvind Rajagopal, and the emergence of timepass 'may signal a truth about what follows in the wake of television' as the experience of duration changes.<sup>[17]</sup> Migration has meant that villagers like our Tamil Brahman informants, in common with their city-dwelling relatives, have personally learnt about boredom, even if for them it is still experienced much less in villages than in cities, let alone American suburbs. What is most generally crucial, though, is that the boredom of urban modernity as a consciously felt experience is spreading through the Indian countryside as well.

This conclusion is admittedly more speculative than certain. First, whereas elderly, well-off, high-caste villagers like Dharmi and Raji probably tend to be content with rural life, people who are younger, poorer or lower in status may have been suffering for a long time from boredom, among other malaises. Secondly, because village ethnographies contain next to no explicit data about being bored, it is virtually impossible to tell whether or how the discourse or experience of boredom used to exist in rural India. Thirdly, even if Goodstein's argument about the modern urban origins of boredom – which depends heavily on classical social theory (Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel) and literary or philosophical texts, rather than empirical historical data – is valid, we still lack definite evidence either that boredom in India developed in its modern cities or, if it did, where, when and how. On the other hand, the limited material on timepass, both as activity and discourse, does point to it being a quite recent, urban response to boredom, which was presumably perceived as growing; timepass, as Rajagopal says, is 'a refuge from and a *measure* of boredom'.<sup>[18]</sup> Thus the emergence of timepass can be read as a kind of proxy for the expansion and intensification of boredom, which is probably now occurring throughout India. Many recreational forms of timepass are enjoyable and many are harmless, but others – like those described by Jeffrey – are expressions of a soul-destroying boredom now afflicting millions of educated, unemployed young men in India today.

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  4. Upamanyu Chatterjee, *English, August: an Indian story* (1998; New York Review Books, 2006).
  5. Rajagopal, *Politics*, p. 134; Srinivas, 'Active viewing', p. 328.
  6. Kaur, *Performative politics*, p. 109.
  7. Abraham, 'Bhai-behen', pp. 345-6.
  8. Craig Jeffrey, *Timepass: youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India* (Stanford University Press, 2010).
  9. Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without qualities: boredom and modernity* (Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 3-4, 107-8.
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  11. Nita Kumar, *The artisans of Banaras: popular culture and identity, 1880-1986* (Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 96-7.
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  14. Jonathan Parry, 'Changing childhoods in industrial Chhattisgarh', in Radhika Chopra and Patricia Jeffery, eds, *Educational regimes in contemporary India* (Sage, 2005), pp. 294-6.
  15. Goodstein, *Experience*, pp. 18-19.
  16. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
  17. Rajagopal, *Politics*, pp. 134-5.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 135, emphasis added.