

# Goldsmiths Research Online

*Goldsmiths Research Online (GRO)  
is the institutional research repository for  
Goldsmiths, University of London*

## Citation

Dattatreyan, E. Gabriel. 2019. Poonam, Snighdha. 2018. Dreamers: How young Indians are Changing the World. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. Review. *American Ethnologist*, 46(3), pp. 357-358. ISSN 0094-0496 [Article]

## Persistent URL

<http://research.gold.ac.uk/26425/>

## Versions

The version presented here may differ from the published, performed or presented work. Please go to the persistent GRO record above for more information.

If you believe that any material held in the repository infringes copyright law, please contact the Repository Team at Goldsmiths, University of London via the following email address: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk).

The item will be removed from the repository while any claim is being investigated. For more information, please contact the GRO team: [gro@gold.ac.uk](mailto:gro@gold.ac.uk)

Poonam, Snigdha. 2018. *Dreamers: How young Indians are Changing the World*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

E. Gabriel Dattatreya  
Goldsmiths, University of London

*Dreamers* attempts to capture the zeitgeist of India's under twenty-five youth demographic that comprise over half the population in the country today. Journalist Snigdha Poonam argues that this is a generation of Indians "hanging between extremes" who are "hitting adulthood with the cultural values of their grandparents...but the life goals of American teenagers" (24). She chooses North India's second tier cities, small towns, and villages as the vantage point by which to understand this generation's aspirations and their limits in contemporary India. Over the course of six chapters, we are introduced to several characters, mostly male, who have figured out novel ways to hustle in places often obscured in media and scholarship. Poonam calls these young people "dreamers". For her dreamers hold very particular aspirations – to have money and hold influence. They are prepared to acquire both through a "whatever works" or *jugaad* sensibility. *Jugaad* is a vernacular Hindi term that can be glossed as a hack or as hacking. A *jugaadu* is someone who is adept at making something out of nothing, a bricoleur if you like. Amit Rai (2019) argues that *jugaadu* and *jugaad*, once terms associated with India's poor and their strategies for survival, have been zealously picked up by corporates and the new business elite to promote an entrepreneurial India in an era where stable wage labor is hard to come by, particularly for the generation Poonam identifies as dreamers. In ethnographically rich detail and clear lively prose, Poonam shows how *jugaadu* ingenuity is embraced by youthful actors outside of the metropolitan centers of India. Moreover, she illustrates how digital worlds emerge for these young people as the key site where dreams can be imagined, made, and frustrated.

By starting a (digital) content farm in a former princely state (chapter 1), running an English school for aspiring technology workers in Ranchi (chapter 2), taking the role of the middle man or fixer in an increasingly digitized state-citizen matrix (chapter 3), becoming a (digital content producing) political fieldworker for the ruling BJP party (chapter 4), doing (online and offline) campus politics (chapter 5), or acting, modelling, or event managing in India's booming culture industries (chapter 6); Poonam shows us how the affectively charged aspirations and pragmatic tactics that link young people from different backgrounds across India are located in digital infrastructures that have exploded in the last decade (Dattatreya, forthcoming; Mankekar, 2017). Yet, while Poonam offers rich ethnographic accounts of contemporary digital *jugaad*, she takes the infrastructures and public pedagogy of digitality and their effects as a taken for granted starting point by which to understand youthful aspiration. The advent and rapid spread of ICTs and their cultural impact in India, however, is anything but a given.

Take for instance the first chapter, which introduces us to Singhal, a young man who moves from his village to the former princely state of Indore. Singhal, after a serendipitous moment when he sees his brother's Facebook page documenting 'amazing Indian things' go viral, starts a content farm called Wittyfeed that produces clickbait to garner 'clicks' across the world that, in short order, has acquired over a billion followers on Facebook and produces much of the short form content that circulates in the United States. In fascinating detail, she illustrates how Singhal eschews conventional metrics that might indicate success such as education or previous employment when hiring content producers for Wittyfeed. Rather, he makes his hiring decisions based on whether applicants can, on the spot, perform their potential to think outside of the caste, religious, and class positions they have inherited. While the stories in this chapter and indeed in all of the chapters were fascinating, I found myself wanting to know a bit more about how these young people develop the kinds of repertoires necessary to successfully perform, in the case of Wittyfeed, the kind of 'individuality' that someone like Singhal values in the first place. What media forms are they consuming that primed them towards such unconventional performances and how did they access them? Might they, as Constantin Nakassis (2016) argues, mobilize citations of transnational popular media in their friend groups to gain status in ways that unwittingly prepare them to become successful? While a discussion of youth

popular cultural consumption and sociality comes out a bit more in some of the chapters (chapter 6, for instance), a bit more attention to the experiences of these young people's exposure to ICT technologies and their emergence amongst the dreamer generation would have been helpful.

Even more than a call for more ethnographic detail, of which I think there is plenty in this book, I think a deeper conceptual engagement with key concepts that emerge in the narrative – digitality, gender, content, and so on – would have helped clarify how dreamers engage with and even create the new aspirational laboring opportunities that exist in digital India today, the limits to their access, and the affective toll it all takes to become a *jugaadu*. I would argue an analysis of gender is particularly underdeveloped. At a superficial level, Poonam only has one central female interlocutor, Richa Singh, whom she problematically dubs the 'angry young woman' in chapter five as a way to describe how she capitalizes on caste, gender, and tribal politics at Allahabad University as way to make a name for herself as a student politician. At a deeper level, Poonam doesn't excavate the gendered implications of what it means to be a dreamer in India today. Who gets to dream and are these dreams, themselves, gendered?

Poonam's gift for storytelling, her ethnographically rich descriptions, and, in moments, her sharp analysis, make *Dreamers* a fantastic book to assign to undergraduate students engaging, perhaps for the first time, with India, 'youth', and the digital. However, the theoretical opportunities that her detailed accounts offer – particularly around digitality and gender -- are left under-unexamined. For teaching purposes, it might be most fruitful to pair *Dreamers* with monographs that delve more deeply into digitally inflected youth cultures, gender formation, and emergent labouring opportunities in contemporary India. When put into conversation with other texts, for instance Jocelyn Chua's (2014) book on youth aspiration and suicide in South India, Poonam's narratively rich storytelling will open up an opportunity for fruitful analysis.

## References

Chua, Jocelyn. 2014. *In Pursuit of the Good Life: Aspiration and Suicide in Globalizing South India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Dattatreyan E. Gabriel. Forthcoming. *The Globally Familiar: Digital hip hop, masculinity, and urban space in Delhi*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Mankekar, Purnima. 2015. *Unsettling India: Affect, Temporality, Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Nakassis, Constantin. 2016. *Doing Style: Youth and mass mediation in South India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rai, Amit. *Jugaad Time: Ecologies of Everyday Hacking in India*. Durham: Duke University Press.