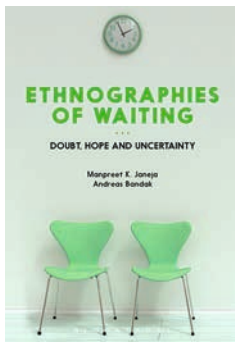


Waiting and not waiting

Manpreet K. Janeja

The recently published volume *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* explores the social phenomenon of ‘waiting’ and its centrality in human society.¹ The book investigates how modes of waiting are negotiated in various ways. Examining the politics and poetics of waiting, it offers fresh perspectives on waiting as the uncertain interplay between doubting and hoping, and asks, “When is time worth the wait?” Waiting thus conceived is intrinsic to the ethnographic method at the heart of the anthropological enterprise. This piece draws on the volume while examining the poignancy that modalities of waiting may acquire when death becomes a form of waiting out time.



Waiting is a pervasive phenomenon across human societies. We all wait – in traffic jams, passport offices, queues, for better weather, an end to fighting, peace. It could be said that waiting is integral to the fabric of human life. Waiting is a particular engagement in, and with, time. The various modes of waiting can range from a passive or inert waiting to a purposeful or active waiting for something.² In other words, the concept of waiting enables us to explore ethnographically what forms of thinking, acting, and relating are possible, or overlooked, in different engagements in, and with, time, across varying social and cultural contexts. What happens when waiting shifts from being a temporary phenomenon to a ‘chronic’ or more permanent feature, where it even becomes an indefinite way of life itself? When, for instance, the signing of a ceasefire between two warring groups marks the end of a period of waiting for peace, but a peace which is always fragile, with people then waiting for this peace to end any moment. How is waiting itself calibrated and regularized by particular cultural norms, ideals, and gendered roles? How can the ethnographic method, and the various forms of waiting it entails (e.g., waiting for interlocutors to show up during fieldwork; waiting for ideas and projects to mature like old wine and ripened cheese; short, medium and longer term engagements with mind notes, older field notes), be used to explore the social phenomenon of waiting? How are we to assess when something is worth the wait, and how do we act, think, and relate while we are at it?

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* dwells on the notion of waiting, an indefinite waiting for someone who never comes, and for something that never happens. Franz Kafka’s *Before the Law* depicts a man from the countryside who is endlessly waiting to gain entry into the law, but is ‘not yet allowed’. The anthropological and, more generally, social science literature, has relatively neglected the concerted study of waiting as a phenomenon, with a few recent notable exceptions which have predominantly focused on the ‘politics of waiting’.

Politics and poetics of waiting

Politics of waiting refers to the engagements with the structural and institutional conditions that compel people to wait. The precarious situation of vast swathes of the world’s human inhabitants forced to wait, often indefinitely, for food, education, health care, employment,

welfare benefits or housing, illustrates this. Or indeed, the case of ever increasing numbers of displaced people – migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers – waiting for rescue in cities such as Homs and Aleppo in Syria, in camps in Jordan, Turkey, Kenya or Bangladesh, or drowning in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea en route to Europe. Thus, waiting, as an imposed form of sanctioning, used to exercise control over other people’s time³ or slow down movement across space of marginalized groups who are made to wait, emerges as a technology of governance. Waiting can also be an active political strategy of defiance by some migrants for example, or a basis for political mobilization and democratic politics as in the case of Jeffrey’s ethnographic study (2010) of ‘chronic waiting’ among unemployed lower middle-class young men in the Indian city of Meerut, thereby highlighting the mutual interaction of creative agency and broader social structures.⁴

An examination of the politics of waiting must be complemented with a focus on the poetics of waiting, which refers to the existential affordances of the engagement in, and with, time where the outcome is uncertain, where people’s doubts coexist with potentials of hope.⁵ Whatever has placed an individual or a collective in a situation of waiting, such a situation brings forth different attitudes and social energies, ranging from hope, patience and urgency to apathy, paralysis and inertia, and often leads to existential questions and doubts. As in the case of migrants caught up in protracted periods of waiting, who may find themselves in a situation of ‘stuckness’,⁶ characterized by invisibility, immobility, uncertainty and arbitrariness, with the act of waiting in transit paradoxically expanding time but compressing space for them.⁷ Or the experiences of waiting endured by the parents of a dying child, where “waiting is

simply an endurance of time that falls away from illusory circuits of meaning and intent”.⁸ Fostering a conversation between the politics and poetics of waiting as uncertain interplays between hoping and doubting, without according primacy to one dimension over the other, enables us to critically approach the precariousness of existence.

An auto-ethnography of death as waiting out time

While waiting for the volume to arrive in print from the publishers, the unexpected happened. My 34-year-old brother died in a car crash on 15 December 2017. The politics and poetics of waiting came together in death. Various members of the immediate and extended family in grief and shock entreated airlines and travel agents, rushed to board airplanes, waited at airports, dashed through security checks and passport control queues, uncertain and doubting yet hoping to catch connecting flights and make it to the cremation on 18 December. Flying across, and through, space and time zones, while journeying through a past, and memories of a life together now cut short, we somehow all landed in the city of Calcutta, where the rest were waiting for us. While various others had negotiated different bureaucratic forms of waiting in identifying the body at the crash site in a remote corner of India, signing legal documents after the post-mortem, and arranging for the coffin to be flown to Calcutta. We underwent rituals of purification as we waited for the body bag to arrive at the house, with tea and coffee being served to shore up a semblance of ‘normality’ in the midst of the ongoing lamenting rituals. We followed the hearse, as it waited in the infamous traffic-jams of the city, to arrive at the temple where we waited for the priest to

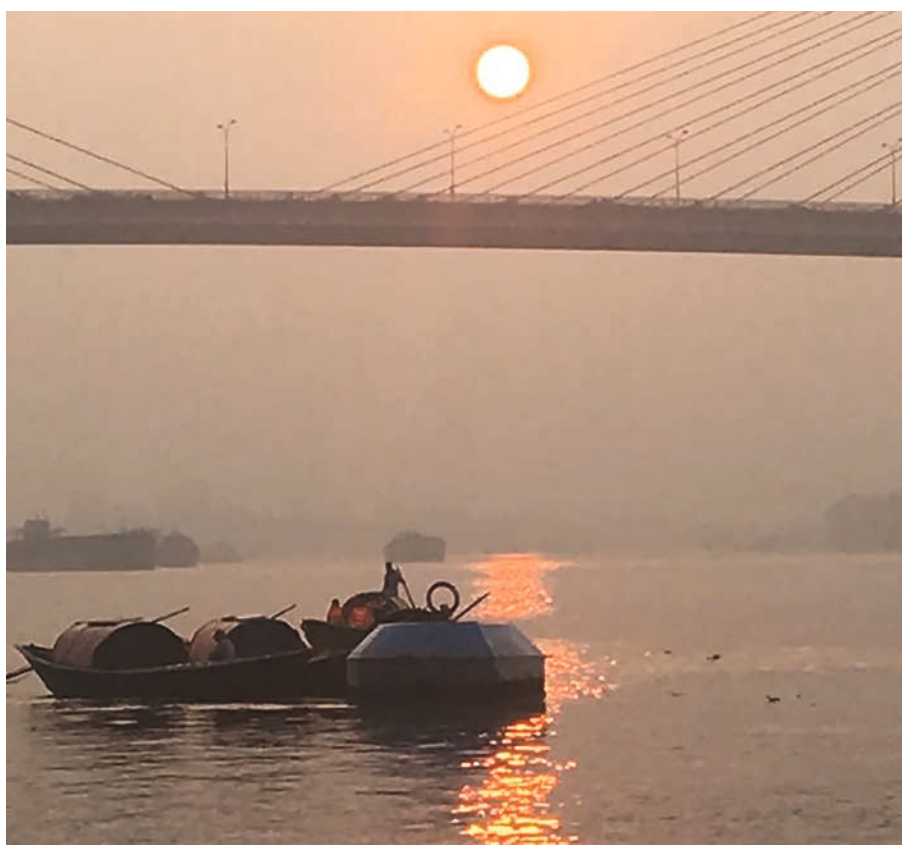
say the final prayers. Walking from the temple, we arrived at the cremation ground, to be told that despite the long queue, our turn would come soon since a relative had ‘speeded things up’ and had negotiated a VIP cremation slot for us. Not-waiting ‘too long’ would ‘speed up’ the cremation rituals and time spent grieving there at the site. The fraught wait, while the elders debated who would perform the last rites, ended with me, as the eldest sibling, being accorded the right to do so, in a stunning inversion of conventional gendered norms that regulate Sikh (and Hindu) cremation rituals, in which women do not cremate.⁹ My endless waiting for gender equality, while contesting and negotiating patriarchal norms in a society deeply calibrated by them, ended in a moment when I least anticipated, expected, or indeed, wanted it. I ended up sharing this moment of equality with my two younger sisters, and the three of us performed the last rites with a cousin (brother), my brother’s best friend. The performance of the symbolic rites having been completed, the body was swept into the furnace, with the men waiting behind for hours to collect the funerary urn with the ashes. The four of us who had performed the symbolic last rites then set out with the urn on a boat with my mother, waiting for the *majhi* (boatman) to slowly take us to the middle of the river, to pour the ashes into the waters of the Bhagirathi-Hooghly, a (dis)tributary of the river Ganga which is believed to be the Hindu sacred site of mortal, temporal, and cosmic transition for the departed.¹⁰ Together with the families of others who died in the same accident, our Kafkaesque waiting before the law continues – for the man who crashed the car, yet survived, to be formally charged.

Care of the dead by “a social network of hands” makes and marks the deceased as “grievable”. Life that is grievable is “life that matters”,¹¹ and is socially valuable, resting on a particular notion of the social.¹² Compared to biological death, which takes place in a relatively short period of time, social death takes longer – we have to wait for the tear in the social fabric to be woven.¹³ This auto-ethnographic reflection on death as waiting out time could be read as such.

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Waiting in the boat on the Bhagirathi-Hooghly, Calcutta, 18 December 2018.