Waiting and not waiting

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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.

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 waited for medical and travel agents, rushed to board airplanes, waited at airports, dashed through security checks and passport control queues, uncertain and doubting yet rushing 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. Waiting 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. In a stunning inversion of conventional and gendered norms that regulate Hindu (and Sikh) cremation rituals, in which women do not cremate, 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 last 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 moment to slowly take us to the middle of the river, to pour the ashes into the waters of the Bhagirathi- Hooghly. Thus was our brother’s body, which had remained waiting for ideas and projects to mature like the lilacs on the bank of the river, finally given a life after his death as waiting out time.