

The Lives of Cycle Rickshaw Men: Labor Migration and Masculinity in North India

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This dissertation, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in North India, examines the lives of men who migrated from the North Indian countryside to Delhi, India to operate cycle rickshaws for work. It argues that they cannot be understood as workers or migrants without simultaneously appreciating them as gendered actors who were attempting to be, or be seen as, proper men. Tracing the theme of masculinity also demonstrates that the lives of these low-caste, labor migrants have meaning that extends beyond their labor and migration. Pedaling a rickshaw, which was done to fulfill the male breadwinner expectation, was believed by the rickshaw men to conflict with their masculine goal of sexual fitness. This conflict of masculine priorities was behind their strategic non-performance of their labor. Thus, to understand the men's worktime (in)activities requires an understanding of their multiple masculine commitments and the tension between them. Furthermore, the men practiced intimate relationships with their wives, sex workers, and female customers that were heavily influenced by their masculine heterosexuality, and these intimate relationships shaped their migration schedules and how they performed their labor.

This dissertation also looks at the relationships that rickshaw men practiced in Delhi with other rickshaw men who they knew from their villages. The support and cooperation exchanged between village-mates was important for the successful completion of their migration circuits, and the proper practice of these relationships was essential to being recognized as good men. The men's village lives were likewise geared towards being, or at least being regarded as, good men, and in

relation to this goal, their circular labor migration imposed constraints and created possibilities. The ethnographic evidence reveals, however, that the fact of labor migration failed to encompass all the important activities and meaning-making in which the rickshaw men engaged. A view is therefore advanced in which actors like those who migrate to operate cycle rickshaws should always be considered as complex, gendered people.

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1.0 Introduction: Cycle Rickshaw Pullers as Men

Cycle rickshaws are three-wheeled vehicles that do not run on a motor or battery power but are pedaled like a bicycle and used to transport people and goods. My dissertation looks at a group of men who migrate from villages in West Bengal and Bihar to operate cycle rickshaws for work in Delhi. I argue that the migratory and laboring lives of these men can only be properly understood in the context of their masculine ideals. Masculine ideals are strained, as well as affirmed, through migration and work, and the men find inventive ways to achieve or approximate them. While labor migration exerts pressures and creates disruptions that change the way that North Indian men go about trying to be proper men, their masculine principles and practices in turn fundamentally shape the labor migration experience. My ethnographic study shows that considering cycle rickshaw men only as laborers, or migrant laborers, is a problematic framework for understanding them. Although labor discipline is not something that a worker entirely sheds when he leaves his job, “laborer” is an incomplete way of understanding men who operate cycle rickshaws whether they are on or off the job. To give the dignity of fuller personhood to the actors in ethnographic studies centered on a workplace, an industry, an economic sector, or a type of job, we need to acknowledge and represent the ways that they are irreducible to their roles as workers.

Basic facts about cycle rickshaw men — or “rickshaw pullers” as they are often called, harking to the hand-pulled predecessors of the cycle rickshaw — are sketchy owing to, “a complete absence of scientific data” on them (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 3). But it seems that cycle rickshaw men began plying Delhi streets around 1940 (High Court of Delhi 2010, 3), and some scholars estimate that four to five million cycle rickshaws operate in India and Bangladesh (Steele 2014, 101), while others believe that up to eight million men pedal cycle rickshaws in India alone (Sood 2012, 3)

with anywhere between 104,000 to 442,000 (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 10) and 500,000 to 800,000 (High Court of Delhi 2010, 3) plying the streets of Delhi. Cycle rickshaws operate in many parts of Delhi, especially around tourist areas, markets, and metro and train stations. The vast majority of cycle rickshaw pullers in Delhi and the National Capital Region are poor, low-caste, young or middle-aged men who migrate there from rural areas in North India.

Scholarly studies of cycle rickshaw men have focused on their economic conditions in India (Singh et al. 2008) and elsewhere (Forbes 1981). Such studies consider the obstacles of poverty, poor health, and unresponsive or hostile governments that rickshaw men face, but they only consider the men as informal workers and economic actors. Other studies stress the social benefits bestowed by the transportation infrastructure provided by cycle rickshaws, from less traffic congestion, to employment opportunities, to accessible transportation for marginalized populations (Hossain and Susilo 2011; Tiwari 2014). Cycle rickshaws are also sometimes studied for the environmental benefits that they provide when compared with motorized transportation options (e.g., Baviskar 2011; Ravi 2016b). If the men who operate the rickshaws are considered, it is usually to argue that they are valuable but vulnerable workers. Consideration is not given to the workers' lives that unfold outside of work, and this problem is also prevalent in historical studies of men who operated hand-pulled rickshaws in Singapore (Warren 1986), South China (Fung 2005), and Vietnam (Hahn 2013). At their best, these studies use the industry and working lives of rickshaw men as prisms to understand the politics and economy of the time, but the men themselves remain mysterious. Shireen Hyrapiet's interesting dissertation on hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata, on the other hand, looks at how the men become integrated into the social fabric of the city (Hyrapiet 2012). She studies them as informal workers, showing how they participate in "place-making" and politics in Kolkata. Still, virtually all Hyrapiet's examples of

place-making and political participation by rickshaw men were descriptions of different styles of work that the men did at their rickshaw jobs, with their politics limited to an assertion to their right to carry on working. The city and its non-rickshaw pulling inhabitants were the ones whose lives were filled with greater convenience and meaning thanks to the work of rickshaw men. As fascinating as such different styles, strategies, and outcomes of working are, it is time to make space to understand the worker as a man whose life is more meaningful than the labor that he performs.

My first encounters with rickshaw pullers happened at their workplace when I arrived in Delhi. Having met them on the job it seemed natural to frame them as informal laborers or as migrant workers. Scenes of rickshaw men sleeping on the pavement, wearing raggedy clothing, lacking the financial means to address health issues, and being beaten by police and motorists convinced me early on that it was also important to frame them as a vulnerable population. And I considered other themes and identities as organizing frameworks for my study, such as caste and regional identity. These identities were very important at different moments in the men's lives, but none of them were consistently important across different situations, places, and roles so that they could serve as organizing themes for my study. The more I talked with the men, the more I saw that framing my study as one about labor and migration seemed to miss something, seemed to exaggerate to an unacceptable degree one area of their lives while minimizing others. Speaking of migration and rickshaw pulling did not usually interest rickshaw men and was not what they were passionate about. My interlocutors were migrant laborers, but this fact did not circumscribe their lives.

To uncover what was most meaningful to the rickshaw pullers, and what their "real story" was, I began paying attention to the kinds of questions they would ask me. And I noticed that they

never failed to ask whether I was married, whether I had children, and whether my parents were in the picture. In other words, they were very interested in my status as a husband, a father, and a son. In turn, I began asking about their own positions as men in their families and villages. Cycle rickshaw pullers always felt an attachment or obligation of some sort to their parents, to their wives, to their children, or to the people of their village, and often they felt all these attachments very strongly. As I began trying to explain my data and research to other people, I noticed that my attempts to account for rickshaw men's actions or motivations usually ended up at some version of the following answer: "Because they are attempting to be or become proper sons, husbands, fathers, and/or men-of-their-village." Over time I learned that a low economic position was not the most consistent common denominator of rickshaw pullers' lives (although poverty does influence their lives a great deal). While there were important differences between their financial situations, there were relatively few exceptions to the rule that through his work in Delhi and when he returned to his village, a rickshaw puller attempted to be, or at least be perceived as, a proper husband, father, son, or man-of-his-village. I eventually realized that trying to see them merely as workers made it more difficult to understand their experience of work and migration, and it also blocked an understanding of why they worked and migrated in the ways that they did. I traded my expectation of learning about them by narrowly focusing on their working lives for an approach focused on the links between their masculinity and their working lives.

My work is in agreement with Chakraborty (2013) when she states that, "The label 'rickshaw-pullers' [...] is clearly not how these migrants identify themselves but more a way of identifying them in the official script" (33), and it attempts to convey a discomfort with the close identification of these men with the kind of work that they do — that is, a fear of the gendered actor being reduced to his profession. Whereas other studies of rickshaw men and transport

workers start with the occupation and then dissect its meaning for the workers and what workers make of it, my research is just as interested in using the workplace as a starting point to learn about laboring men even as they exist independent of their labor, and when they are not at work. This is the same as nestling the occupation within other parts of life, so that it may be viewed in relation to them when trying to understand the worker as a full human.

Around 141 million people migrated within India for work between 2007 and 2008 (Khan 2019, 51), and a disproportionate number of those who migrated from rural to urban areas were males (Khan 2019, 53). The number of Indian men who migrate internally from their villages to the city for work is increasing, and over three and a half million people from rural Bihar and West Bengal migrated temporarily to urban areas between 2007 and 2008 (Keshri 2019, 145). These migrant laborers are crucial not only to economic life, but also to the social fabric of the communities of which they are part, as well as to broader political and environmental trends in South Asia, so we must therefore understand them as more than rational actors or “footloose labour.” Other scholars have made similar points regarding populations of workers in other sectors (e.g., Huberman 2012; Selvaraj 2014) and in other parts of the world (e.g., Graeber 2018; Millar 2018). These scholars contribute to the broader project of showing how all people’s lives entail complexities that defy attempts to pigeonhole them as workers, and my research joins a smaller number of researchers (e.g., De Neve and Donner 2004; Ramaswami 2012) who reinforce this project from an analytical perspective that highlights and traces workers’ masculinity at and beyond work.

Recently, following the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in India, there was a government mandated shutdown. The shutdown, however, was designed only to meet the needs of the middle classes while rickshaw men and their ilk were ignored. Thus, with government transportation

services not running, incredible numbers of poor people performing informal or manual contract labor in India's metropolises were left to figure out for themselves how to return to their villages, with many resorting to walking hundreds of kilometers (Biswas 2020). Academics and pundits roundly criticized the government's classist shutdown, and the focus of their criticism was on the economic and public health problems that accompanied the sudden return migrations, and how to distribute resources to the migrants better and faster (e.g., Mukhopadhyay and Naik 2020; Singh and Patel et al. 2020; Suresh et al. 2020). But just maybe, if a more humanistic view of all workers prevailed, it would be less possible to ignore in the first place the needs of the poorest ones.

1.1 The Workers

Many people with whom I spoke in Delhi who were not affiliated with the rickshaw pulling industry insisted that rickshaw pullers were lazy, drunks, and thieves. They would also say things like "[Rickshaw men] are simple men who lack good business sense." And it was common to witness police, motorists, and middle-class Delhi residents behaving aggressively toward rickshaw men, even physically attacking and harassing them. Early in my fieldwork, I interviewed employees at a couple different NGOs that were trying to empower rickshaw men. But the more that I learned about the NGOs' approaches, the more I saw that they started with the assumption that not only were rickshaw men in need of material and legal assistance, but that they also needed moral guidance to improve their hygiene, their spending and savings habits, their drinking and drug habits, their religious purity, and so on. Of course, not everyone had a negative or paternalistic opinion of cycle rickshaw men. However, negative opinions were widespread, and people who

held them tended to equate the job with character flaws, so that knowing the man's profession was the same as knowing the man.

Cycle rickshaw pulling was understood by most Indians as men's work. In Delhi all cycle rickshaw pullers are men (Ravi 2016a, 95), and it would have been virtually inconceivable for a woman to work as a rickshaw puller. The non-existence of women in the profession certainly had nothing to do with women being sheltered from hard work. Labor-class women did migrate to Delhi for work (albeit it was relatively uncommon for women from the villages in which I conducted fieldwork to migrate for work), but ideas about which jobs are proper women's work, along with the stigma and humiliation that a woman would face if she tried to operate a rickshaw, ensured that women were directed toward other jobs while it was men who pedaled rickshaws.¹ The rickshaw pullers who I met ranged in age from twelve years old to over seventy years old. Nearly ninety percent of rickshaw pullers in Delhi are between nineteen and forty years old, with the average age being twenty-seven years old (Kurosaki et al. 2007, 10). Rickshaw men earned and collected money per trip, so they did not have to wait for a paycheck at the end of the month, and they did not have to worry about a boss withholding their earnings. Getting to pocket cash earnings every day was a major advantage to the job of rickshaw pulling in the eyes of many rickshaw men. On the other hand, disputes with customers happened all the time and I witnessed many customers refusing to pay after rickshaw men had provided them with service. Earnings varied and depended on many factors such as luck, the mechanical soundness and aesthetic appeal of the rickshaw, the quality and quantity of regular customers that a rickshaw man had cultivated,

¹ Rickshaw men recognized the absence of women from their profession but denied that there were any gendered restrictions to employment, mentioning that the Indian government has passed laws enshrining equal rights for men and women. They said the reason why women did not operate cycle rickshaws came down to safety, explaining that women rickshaw pullers could be assaulted by male passengers on an empty street, and I think this explanation should be understood as an excuse through which to control women as much as it may be a legitimate fear.

and the weather. The neighborhood itself was a factor, as traffic congestion, police interference, and the amount, type (e.g., ethnicity, tourist/local), and income of potential customers all varied. In some neighborhoods, rickshaw men reported making six hundred rupees per day (just over US\$8), and in other places men reported between one hundred and fifty and three hundred rupees per day (US\$2 to \$4). The men in South Delhi where I studied made about one hundred fifty rupees on a bad day, or on a half day. At the other end, they very, very rarely made over six hundred and fifty rupees per day. There were some men in my field site who were industrious, savvy, and physically fit, and could consistently make five hundred rupees per day. But most men earned between four and five hundred rupees (roughly US\$5.50 to \$6.75) on a good day, and between two hundred and fifty and four hundred rupees (US\$3.50 to \$5.50) on an average day. This is about a hundred rupees higher than the estimate from a high-quality study completed in 2012 (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 20). Depending on the distance, destination, number of passengers and luggage, time of day, and so on, most trips brought cycle rickshaw pullers between ten and forty rupees.² Rickshaw men usually worked between ten and thirteen hours per day, and this included periodic breaks and a lunch break. Some of them had contracts with local people to transport children to school in the morning, and they would begin work around seven or eight o'clock in the morning and continue until nine o'clock at night when the shops in the market began shutting down.

Rickshaw pulling presented a limited range of options for earning money. All my key interlocutors specialized in taxiing passengers, as did most rickshaw men in my field site. Some of them supplemented this primary income by also forming relationships with local shop owners

² Fares were negotiated directly with the passenger(s). Usually this was not a big deal and entailed the hopeful rider saying the name of their destination followed by the rickshaw man stating a price (or sometimes just holding up a single finger to mean ten rupees, or two fingers to mean twenty rupees). The customer would either agree to the price and climb aboard the rickshaw or walk away to find a rickshaw man who would make the journey for less money. Arguments over prices often flared up.

and residents and running errands for them. At railway stations, it was possible to specialize in transporting goods and luggage, and this had the perk of not having to argue with passengers, but the loads that they were required to haul could be extremely heavy and some men were afraid to do this work because they thought that thieves might heist their cargo en route. The local Burger King paid a couple cycle rickshaw men to outfit their rickshaws with bulky signs that advertised the restaurant. The size of the signs precluded carrying passengers, so the rickshaw men just sat in visible areas with their rickshaws for ten hours per day in exchange for five hundred rupees from the super-rich fast-food chain. Other rickshaw men took advantage of operating a cycle rickshaw by using it to earn money connecting sex workers with clients. This type of work was more popular at night, and usually the rickshaw men would earn a commission for dropping men who were seeking to buy sex at various unmarked brothels. At least one rickshaw puller who I knew would pedal around with a sex worker in the back of his rickshaw, and together they would lure customers into riding to a brothel. Near tourist areas in other parts of the city, there was an overwhelming number of rickshaw men who would tout for shops and hotels, earning commissions for dropping customers there. A few rickshaw men who I met in touristy areas seemed to focus their economic energies on connecting customers with illegal drugs, but I cannot confirm the details of that hustle. Hyrapiet (2012) has described how men who operate hand-pulled rickshaws in Kolkata integrate themselves into the social fabric of the city by becoming night watchmen in exchange for a place to sleep, and by being available to offer an array of other services like ambulance services and door-to-door delivery services. Certainly, cycle rickshaw men do perform such services in Delhi, but none of my key interlocutors did.

1.2 The Industry

Some rickshaw pullers owned their own rickshaws, but most rented their rickshaws for a fee of five to ten percent of their daily earnings from a contractor, known as a *thekedaar*, who owned many rickshaws. The claim is sometimes made that the supposed existence of “*thekedaar* mafias” make the industry highly exploitative of rickshaw pullers, and while evidence for this claim is not offered, it tends to be made alongside attempts to abolish cycle rickshaws as part of “modernization” or “development” schemes (see Kurosaki et al. 2012, 45; Ravi 2013, 125; Tiwari 2014, 84-85). The popular belief that rickshaw men must be heavily exploited by their *thekedaar* may have to do with cycle rickshaws being associated with the hand-pulled rickshaws that operate in Kolkata, and which many people consider to be inhumane (Sood 2012, 3). Against such claims of exploitation, were the claims of rickshaw men themselves. Even after I had spent a year building trust with the rickshaw men, they still described their *thekedaar* as friends, as helpful, and as good men. I will have more to say in Chapter Two about whether the relationships between rickshaw men and *thekedaar* should be thought of as exploitative but for now I will briefly say that the evidence in Delhi suggests that they were not terribly so.

Thekedaars provided no training to novice rickshaw men, but they could be sources of information and advice.³ Some rickshaw men enjoyed drinking tea and shooting the breeze with their *thekedaar*. I began pedaling a rickshaw during fieldwork to learn about the job (discussed further below), and my *thekedaar* liked to tease me about my status as a bachelor. Aside from

³ Training happened on the job, and informally. My interlocutors described how they acquired the knack for pedaling a rickshaw within a few days, and more slowly mastered the layout of the neighborhoods. New rickshaw pullers would hang out with more seasoned rickshaw pullers, watching them and taking advice from them. Other cycle rickshaw pullers would show them where to find fresh drinking water, toilets, and cheap food throughout the neighborhoods. When I first began operating a rickshaw, I was unfamiliar with the locations to which customers wished to travel, so I asked them to direct me as we went.

providing rickshaws for rent, *thekedaars* also provided space to store the vehicles between shifts. The space is usually called a “garage” (in English), and it could be an open field, the shoulder of a street, or an enclosed shed or warehouse. My *thekedaar*’s “garage” was a hundred-meter strip along the edge of a street where the rickshaws that were not being used were tightly lined up and chained together. It was a lively place at most times during the day, with rickshaw pullers passing through and stopping to rest and pay rent. There were a few food vendors there and the men came to have lunch with other rickshaw men and gossip with the vendors and their *thekedaar*. Most *thekedaars* were also responsible for normal maintenance of their rickshaws (Sood 2012, 7), and my *thekedaar* had a mechanic’s shop on site, next to his “garage.” Used tires and tools, screws and bolts, spilled out onto the street from the mechanic’s stall, and there were several adept and grease-covered male mechanics who were always busy fixing flats, truing wheels, re-doing brakes, and tweaking the temperamental bottom brackets to which the pedals are affixed.

Laws governing cycle rickshaws and their use in Delhi that were established in 1960 did not recognize *thekedaars* as actors in the industry. They coupled ownership and operation of the vehicles by mandating that licenses for pedaling a rickshaw could only be issued to the owner of the vehicle (High Court of Delhi 2010, 8). There was a complicated way to work around this law, and to arrange licenses for rickshaw men who rented from *thekedaar*. A rickshaw puller who applied for a license would need to obtain his *thekedaar*’s proof of ownership of the rickshaw, so that he could show it to the license-granting agency. The proof of ownership was in the *thekedaar*’s name, and since licenses could only be issued to rickshaw owners, the agency would ultimately issue the rickshaw puller’s license to the *thekedaar*. *Thekedaars* were afraid that rickshaw pullers would steal their rickshaw or lose the license, so they safeguarded the license when the rickshaw puller migrated back to his village, and often even when he was working in Delhi. To make matters

more complicated, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the governing body responsible for regulating cycle rickshaws, used to set a limit on the number of licenses available for cycle rickshaws in Delhi. Over the years, the limit was increased until 1997 when it topped out at 99,000 (High Court of Delhi 2010, 3; Sood 2012, 5). The quota was set arbitrarily, and never reflected the actual number of cycle rickshaws on the road which was always much higher. Limited licenses, and the convoluted path for rickshaw pullers to obtain a license, ensured that most of them remained unlicensed. Police have never had to look far for an excuse to harass cycle rickshaw pullers.

In 2010, the High Court of Delhi issued a ruling stating that the MCD's limit on licenses was unconstitutional, and it also struck down the old law coupling rickshaw ownership with licensing (High Court of Delhi 2010). This made it much easier for rickshaw pullers to get licenses, at least in theory. But just prior to the court's ruling, the MCD issued "provisions" governing the regulation of cycle rickshaws in which it doubled down on its strict licensing policies designed to criminalize cycle rickshaw pullers and limit the places in the city where cycle rickshaw were allowed to operate, all with an eye towards eventually eliminating the use of cycle rickshaws in the city. The High Court directed the MCD to revamp its approach to regulating cycle rickshaws, and to develop a more realistic and streamlined system of licensing that took into account the concerns of NGOs and environmentalists who had begun advocating for fairer treatment of cycle rickshaw pullers. But on the ground, the court's directive was implemented inconsistently and unevenly, and this unevenness intensified in 2012 when the MCD divided into three sub-municipalities: the North Delhi Municipal Corporation, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation, and the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 39-40). In neighboring states like Haryana, similar disregard for standing laws exists. In their 2008 study of cycle rickshaw pullers

in Haryana, Singh and Singh et al. (2008) are alarmed that, “Surprisingly, in spite of the law being in place, its provisions are not implemented in letter and spirit. No provisions concerning road safety and training are implemented by the state. During the study it was observed that neither the pullers nor the concerned officials had any knowledge about the Haryana Cycle Rickshaws (Regulation of Licence) Act 1982” (124).

I visited the local office of South Delhi Municipal Corporation to try to understand its approach to governing the cycle rickshaw industry. I spoke with the person in charge at that office, and before I could even ask him any questions, he told me that most cycle rickshaw pullers were cheaters and liars, and he asked me if any of them had given me trouble. During the interview, he affirmed that rickshaw men were required to have licenses, then showed me the counter where they needed to apply for the licenses. There was a line of men who looked like poor migrants queued at the single window, and many more waiting on the benches nearby. There were no pens available to complete the required forms, and the office had run out of the required forms anyway. I asked the MCD official about the future of cycle rickshaw pullers in Delhi, and he told me that, “Whenever they are in large numbers it is hard to control them. They get together in one area, and they are very powerful. With hundreds of them on the streets, what can we do? But when their numbers become less, where there are less of them, that is where we can eliminate them.” I was too horrified to ask any follow-up questions. The interview had been conducted in English, but I had brought along an interpreter just in case. As we were leaving, the interpreter exclaimed, “Wow, these guys really hate cycle rickshaw pullers!”

I did not acquire a license when I began operating a rickshaw, since it is always nice to minimize bureaucratic entanglements. But there were other good reasons for not getting licensed. I believe that carrying a license would have set me that much further apart from the rickshaw men,

because most of them did not carry a license. It is estimated that 93% of rickshaw pullers in Delhi do not carry a license (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 42), and I believe this number is still fairly accurate today. The men were aware that licenses were required by law, but they were unconcerned by it. They told me that no one carried a license, and that the police did not give them trouble for not having a license although the police had that authority. I witnessed the police harass rickshaw men in many ways, but I never observed a police officer ask to see a rickshaw man's license. In the past in Delhi, the MCD mercilessly confiscated, impounded, and destroyed cycle rickshaws. One of my interlocutors had his rickshaw impounded when the police accused him of blocking traffic, but the responsibility to recover the rickshaw fell on the *thekedaar*. I did not see or hear about the MCD impounding many rickshaws during my years of fieldwork. During those years, MCD was more focused on harassing street vendors in my field areas and stealing merchandise and equipment from them.

In the past, MCD set zones in which rickshaw men were allowed to work, but this system was deemed illegal by the High Court of Delhi in 2010. To this day, the MCD regularly, and arbitrarily, restricts cycle rickshaws from entering certain areas and arterial roads. In addition, some colonies are gated, and the residents create rules and post security guards to exclude cycle rickshaws. Restrictions imposed by the government, or by residents' associations, did impact cycle rickshaw men's business by, for example, limiting their access to customers and creating lengthy and dangerous travel detours. However, there were other factors that played even greater roles in determining a cycle rickshaw man's work territory and radius. With some exceptions and evolving restrictions on certain roads and areas, cycle rickshaw men could pedal great distances throughout Delhi if they so chose. However, fast moving motor vehicle traffic on major roads made inter-neighborhood travel risky. Some men would still consider taking a long trip for the right price, but

the real problem was that after delivering their passenger to their destination, they would find themselves in an unfamiliar neighborhood where it would be difficult to quickly find new passengers and those new passengers' destinations. Most likely, they would need to make the long return trip without a fare. Delhi is a huge city, and it is impossible for anyone to learn the streets and addresses in the whole city or even in most of it. Cycle rickshaw men specialized in one or two colonies within a small radius of a few kilometers, where they could work alongside their friends, find repeat customers, and learn the streets. This way, too, at the end of the day when they needed to return to the garage and pay their *thekedaar*, they did not have far to pedal. I have heard of *thekedaar* instituting a mafia-like control over areas of other cities — stopping rickshaw men at checkpoints and taxing them for safe passage — but I was unable to find evidence of this type of control over work radius in Delhi. The other practical pressures that I just mentioned kept the men anchored to a locality and determined how far they were willing to pedal from it.

Today, cycle rickshaw pullers are still an important part of Delhi's transportation infrastructure, and in some areas tens of thousands of them can be found. Early in my research, I tried to apply ideas from the burgeoning literature on the anthropology of infrastructure to help make sense of cycle rickshaw pulling. But I eventually gave up because the more I got to know the men, the more I saw that the infrastructure that they provided held no great meaning for them. Unfortunately, too, they are under-appreciated if not outright denigrated by many people in Delhi who considered them to be a type of anti-infrastructure that provide a disservice to the city: "Attitudes towards cycle-rickshaw in India are by and large negative" (Singh and Singh et al. 2008, 116). This is for caste-ist, classist, and anti-migrant attitudes, but it is also because cycle rickshaw pullers are thought to block motor vehicle traffic, cause traffic jams, cheat customers, and generally create havoc on the streets. My sense is that over the past five years or so, there has been a modest

decline in the numbers of cycle rickshaw pullers in Delhi due to a confluence of factors including the explosion in numbers of battery-powered rickshaws, the swelling motor vehicle traffic, the continued attacks and harassment by MCD and police officers, the rising cost of living in the city and the bourgeois war against poor people's housing, and also complex changes over the last couple generations in rural areas which divert would-be cycle rickshaw pullers towards other economic paths.

1.3 Background

1.3.1 Class

Over eighty percent of men who operate cycle rickshaws in Delhi come from rural areas (Singh and Singh et al. 2008, 118) such as the rural areas in Bihar and West Bengal from which my interlocutors originated. Around sixty percent of rickshaw men who migrate to Delhi own small parcels of land in their villages of origin, with the remainder owning none (Kurosaki et al. 2007, 11). My interlocutors' parents were peasants with small or no landholdings, and a few of them were also small-time entrepreneurs. Most rickshaw men farmed the land in their home districts, at least part time, and many of them did so as day laborers for wealthy landowners. Some of them also worked near their villages as contract laborers on construction sites. Contract labor in the agricultural and construction sectors pays poorly, changes seasonally, is rife with exploitation, and is subject to uncertainties such as droughts and floods. The men who I studied were not college educated, and only one of them had completed 10th grade while many of them had not completed 5th grade. Illiteracy was high among them, and this was another factor that

limited the possibility of finding good jobs (for a fuller discussion of the types of jobs and economic activities open to rickshaw men in their villages, see Chapter Five).

Joint family homes were idealized by my interlocutors — Hindus and Muslims alike — however none of them actually shared a house in the village with both their parents, or with their brothers. The parents of many of my interlocutors had passed away by the time I began my study. In a couple instances, an old parent did stay in the rickshaw man's village home, but more often parents and brothers had their own houses that were adjacent or near the rickshaw man's house. Their homes were very modest one or two room brick, mud, and bamboo structures which they owned themselves. They shared these homes with their wives and children, and a few of them also housed their married son's wives, however, since the houses were so small, and since privacy was valued, the goal was usually to construct or purchase a new house nearby for the young couple as soon as possible. Many men bore substantial debts from their purchases of land, their construction of houses for themselves or their sons, from parents' funerals and daughters' weddings, from the treatment of illnesses, or from their children's school tuition or college fees. Besides land, houses, or sons who could earn dowries and incomes, some rickshaw men possessed valuable assets such as a small number of livestock, a motorcycle, jewelry, a fruit tree, or a thicket of bamboo. They seldom had much money in the bank, and if occasionally a large sum would come their way, it was quickly used to pay debts, make loans, invest in their children's educations or weddings, open a small business venture, or to make home improvements. Rickshaw men were not the very poorest men in their villages, but a major illness or accident could be devastating to their families' economic security.

This picture of my interlocutors' class situation which, to be clear, was every bit that of the working poor, should be balanced with an understanding that the majority of them practiced with

their families a degree of subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing, and/or home-based crafts for consumption and sales such as sewing, making yogurt, and basket-weaving. There were significant differences between the economic situations of rickshaw men as, for example, owning a bit of land or not could mean the difference between relative financial security or ruin. But while variations existed, my interlocutors were all more similar in their economic situations to one another than any one of them was to any member of India's middle class. I do not believe that the rickshaw men realistically expected to lift themselves out of poverty through any of their own income-generating activities. So far as they endeavored to jump classes, their plan was to send their children for good education so that they would be capable of seeking *naukri* (secure employment, usually in a government bureaucracy or white-collar profession) or marrying someone with *naukri*.

1.3.2 Caste

The rickshaw men's class positions were not separable from their caste positions. Muslim castes in the areas of my fieldwork included (in rough descending order of rank) *Pathan*, *Sekh*, *Darbanya*, *Pechi* (this is the only one that was not Sunni Muslim), *Sabji*, *Dhunia*, *Momin Ansari*, *Kahar*, and *Dhobi*. All my key interlocutors who were Muslim were of the intermediately ranked *Sabji* caste which was traditionally composed of vegetable mongers. They would not concede that their caste was lower than any Hindu caste, however Hindus of all castes tended to claim that all Muslims were beneath them. There were many Hindu castes in the region in which my village field sites were located, and some of the larger ones (in rough descending order of rank) were *Brahmins* of various types, *Ghosh*, *Karmakar*, *Mandal* (which in some places is more of a surname than a caste but was certainly a caste in my village field sites), *Ravidas*, *Chamar*, and *Dom*. My

Hindu key interlocutors were all from the *Mandal*, *Ravidas*, and *Chamar* castes except for one who claimed to be a *Brahmin*.

Scholars have observed that caste is still an important social, economic, and political factor across India (Roy 2012) and in rural West Bengal (Rogaly 1998, 22) from where many of my interlocutors originated. Caste was certainly very important for my interlocutors who frequently practiced intra-caste sharing and inter-caste avoidance of touch, food, marriage, and other interactions, and were themselves included and excluded by others based on caste. People use such practices to maintain and increase their spiritual purity and social standing in West Bengal (Lamb 2000, 36-41), and to negotiate their economic situations and gendered sense of selves in Bihar (Kantor 2016, 133-159). My interlocutors and their relatives were excluded from job opportunities, marriage alliances, and religious ceremonies because of their low castes, and this had serious economic, health, and emotional repercussions.

Being low caste had a formative and ongoing effect on my interlocutors, but it did not enter into every moment of quotidian life. In fact, they spent much of their time intermingling with one another across religious and caste lines and ignoring the logics of spiritual purity and contamination. Such inter-caste fraternity happened much more often between men who shared similar labor-class positions, and whose caste rankings were not too far apart. Scholars of Indian sociology have noted that low caste people do not always internalize the values of the dominant castes (Kapadia 1995; Guha 1997), and the rickshaw men made their own rules when they were able to, and when it suited them (see Chapter Four for a more thorough discussion). On the ground, caste is not always practiced as a system, or systematically practiced, and scholars have wisely argued against allowing a determining position for caste hierarchy in South Asian society (Khare 1984; Appadurai 1986 & 1988; Daniel 1986), and between Hindus and Muslims specifically

(Gottschalk 2000). I hesitate to treat the men's castes or communal affiliations as the master narrative for my study because, "Western scholars of the Subcontinent rely too heavily on *Hindu* and *Muslim* as descriptive adjectives and analytic categories. Many defer too quickly to *Hinduism* and *Islam* as self-apparent for exclusive arenas of religious activity. In the end, too many students come away with the impression that South Asian culture can best be viewed, de facto, through bifurcated glasses that discretely discern two halves of India - *Hindu* and *Muslim*" (Gottschalk 2000, 3). The men did not always regard communal divisions as natural or eternal, and instead formed bonds of friendship and cooperation according to their shared belongings to particular villages or regions. My discussions of the men's castes in Chapters Four and Five are offered as important pieces of the puzzle while being mindful of the, "excessive attention we still ascribe to the importance of religion (Hinduism, in particular) in everyday life" (Srivastava 2004, 13). Furthermore, religious values and identities are not dwelt upon in Chapters Two and Three when the men's intimate and sexual relationships are considered, because Indians' sexualities have too often been automatically tied to their religious beliefs even while emerging ethnographic evidence demonstrates that there is a, "need for decentering the search for the 'core' values and concerns of South Asian sexualities" (Srivastava 2004, 14).

1.3.3 Masculinity

The class and caste situations of the men who I studied meant they faced limited job opportunities and discrimination at the structural and individual levels. This situation was what the men lived and struggled through, and in a fundamental way it provided for them a way of knowing and interacting with the world. Still, the rickshaw men were never just poor *Dalits*; the identity of Indian laborers is always gendered (Fernandes 1997). All the rickshaw men who I studied self-

identified as men, and they were “read” by others as males. Furthermore, they all lay claim to the rights, and acknowledged the responsibilities, that came with being men in their class/caste situations. In other words, their class/caste situations were inflected with gendered meaning, and they themselves spoke of the paramount importance of their masculine duties. My field observations did not contradict Kantor’s (2016) assertion that, “gender is perhaps the primary category shaping life in rural India” (31). Domestic life in rickshaw men’s villages was highly segregated by gender, especially the different types of chores that were expected of men and women. The religious practices of men and women were quite different, with women being excluded at times, and from certain areas, of temples and mosques. Leisure activities, schools, and public spaces like the village market and tea shops were all segregated by gender. And life paths were starkly gendered, with women being required upon marriage to leave their family and village to live with their husbands, while men remained living in the village of their birth, often very close to their parents and siblings, and were expected to provide a comfortable home to their bride. Men customarily received inheritance from their parents while daughters did not. Beyond these structurally and institutionally segregated gendered roles, gender permeated the practice of seemingly every interpersonal interaction whether homo- or hetero-social. During discussions and in arguments my interlocutors’ moral vernacular stressed being a good man (*accha aadmi*) more than anything else.

Even though North Indian men’s lives are thoroughly gendered experiences and expressions, “gender studies done in South Asia have generally been weakened by the relative dearth of attention paid to men. In the field of gender studies, ‘gender’ has been used largely as a code for ‘women’” (Lamb 2000, 29). I do not claim that high quality studies of Indian masculinity do not exist; on the contrary, they have multiplied in the last couple decades. Nevertheless, the

enormity of the social phenomenon deserves much more scrutiny, especially where it intersects with, and is often overshadowed by, labor. It is true that, “[c]onventional class analysis has a lot to say about relations between men but often as universal ungendered subjects” (Jackson 2001, 7). The literature that offers gendered analysis of informal labor and migrant labor in India tends to focus on women and/or wage differentials between men and women (e.g., Kalpagam 1994; Sen 2017; Rajan and M. 2019). Compared with the literature on the intersection of women’s gender and their labor, and also with the literature on the intersection of labor and caste, the study of masculinity among informal workers in South Asia has been a largely neglected area of study. Therefore, “understanding [...] how men with marginalised identity (because of ethnic, migratory and livelihood-related locations) negotiate hegemonic masculinity and power hierarchies in their relations with other men is important, particularly in the field of South Asian masculinities” (Chopra et al. 2004; 5).

Masculinity studies owes much to the work of R.W. Connell and her concept of hegemonic masculinities (Connell 1995). She explained how a variety of masculinities are arranged hierarchically with the dominant form enjoying widespread acceptance and support. The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been critiqued, however it remains useful for many scholars (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). In the following chapters when I write about “masculine expectations” or “masculine ideals” about breadwinning and being a popular village patriarch, I understand them to be articulations of a hegemonic masculinity. There have been attempts to identify central themes of Indian masculinity that resonate with the concept of hegemonic masculinity, including the theme of living with anxiety derived from the supposed dangers of semen loss (e.g., Carstairs 1957; Kakar 1978), and the themes of family honor, marriage, the reproduction of the normative household, and men’s control over their wives and female relatives

(Derne 1995; Osella and Osella 2006). Other studies have focused on historical constructions of masculinity in India, especially the construction of Indian men as weak in relationship to Western colonizing men (e.g., Sinha 1995; Chowdhury 2001; Chattopadhyay 2011).

Some dominant types of masculinity may exist throughout India and South Asia, but my research is not concerned with uncovering them. Although I argue in Chapter Two that breadwinning is one form of masculinity in India that is widespread and taken very seriously by many people, I do so in order to show how, and the extent to which, my interlocutors stray from that ideal type. I follow Srivastava who calls for a focus on the “little traditions” that get missed when we focus on grand narratives and hegemonic masculinity. He also calls for an increased focus on ethnographic detail, to match what has until lately been an overemphasis on history and the colonial construction of Indian gender and sexual identities (Srivastava 2004, 15). This type of approach is already evident in ethnographic research out of Malaysia where fieldwork is used to uncover “counterhegemonic masculinities” and “practical masculinities” that exist despite what kinship rules dictate or popular narratives idealize (Peletz 1994). And there is a growing recognition that multiple and marginalized masculinities exist and evolve in India (e.g., Srivastava 2007; Chopra 2007; Chakraborty 2013; Dasgupta and Gokulsing 2014). Following what might be thought of as a post-structural turn in masculinities studies (see Sedgwick 1985; Wacquant 2004; Reeser 2010), ethnographic studies zero-in on Indian men’s micro practices and their meanings within broader power relations (George 2006; Jeffrey 2010; Baas 2018). It is helpful to scrutinize certain such micro practices and discourses because although rickshaw men inhabit rigidly gendered social structures in their villages and in Delhi, they do not do so passively. The ethnographic chapters of this dissertation examine the details of rickshaw men’s practices of

slacking at work, intimacy, and support for one another revealing a messy picture that grand narratives about masculinity cannot resolve.

It is important, too, not to assume that Indian men understand their bodies in the same way as people elsewhere do. People in Western culture privilege a mind/body separation stemming from Cartesian philosophy. But Alter (1992) has shown that, for male wrestlers in India, this type of separation does not make sense. He describes how these men's bodily conditions are assumed to be interlinked with their moral statuses. In particular, the practice of semen retention is closely associated with physical health and moral strength (Alter 1992; 2011). Alter does not recycle the stereotype of "semen anxiety" that pathologizes Indian men and reifies their Otherness. Rather he uses fine-grained ethnography to define the ways that very particular communities of Indian men implement an indigenous strand of philosophy concerning the connection between their somatic conditions and their moral character. Although the rickshaw men were not *brahmachari* (practitioners of the philosophy of semen retention), and they should not be expected to have the same ideas about sex, semen, or their bodies that wrestlers do, they did believe there was a connection between their sexual potency and their social value as men (see Chapter Two). I have borrowed Alter's approach of looking closely at the specific linkages between men's bodies and their moral understandings of themselves, and this approach is most evident when I discuss the men's bodies as sites that represent their multiple masculine ideals of breadwinning and sexual fitness, and that reflect the conflict between those ideals.

Sometimes men's labor aggrandizes their masculinity (e.g., Kidder 2011; Sopranzetti 2013, 73; Derickson 2014; Gibbs 2014), and in the case of rickshaw men there was considerable overlap between their masculine identities and their laboring lives, namely in the ambition to be breadwinners for their families. As will become clear throughout this dissertation, the masculine

edification that rickshaw men received by carrying out their labor migration is a key context for my study. Yet some rickshaw men saw conflicts between working and being proper men, and most of them juggled a world of manly cares that were separate from being good earners. To the extent that breadwinning was a hegemonic masculinity, it is possible to say that rickshaw men struggled, to degrees, against hegemonic masculinity. However, they all benefited from it to large extents, and in some instances, rather than conceptualize hierarchically arranged masculinities, it made more sense to think of the men as strategically selecting from a multitude of viable masculine practices to achieve disparate goals. Researchers in India (De Neve and Donner 2004), and elsewhere (Strier et al. 2014), have shown that multiple masculinities can exist among a place's working class, and my study builds on this by showing the multiple masculinities located among a group of one type of worker. Furthermore, evidence from ethnographic studies of male workers has revealed the difficulty in defining men by their labor. The lives of working-class men in Russia are only comprehensible in the context of their attempts to escape their class situations by enacting gendered performances that are valued by more privileged classes (Walker 2018). Or consider the Pakistani men who migrate to Europe for the seemingly straightforward reason of seeking jobs, but for whom the risk of migration is so great that it suggests something other than economic motivation (Ahmad 2011). It is clear that men's jobs are frequently covers for, hurdles to, or unavoidable contexts for realizing masculine goals that are separate from work. The point is that looking narrowly at men as workers does not necessarily reveal much about the men in question. I treat rickshaw men's labor-masculinity nexus as a starting point, investigating out from their labor activity to their off-duty lives in Delhi, and then to their village lives.

1.3.4 Migration

Limited economic opportunities in their villages, and the duty to provide materially for their families, meant that the men who I studied found it necessary to migrate for work. They practiced circular migration between their villages and Delhi primarily to earn money for themselves and their families. Men migrated to Delhi to operate cycle rickshaws from all the corners of North India as well as Nepal and sometimes from South India. In the streets where I conducted research, those from Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Bihar were most heavily represented. However, it should be noted that labor migration from states such as West Bengal and Bihar is nothing new. Even before Independence, many people from these states were shipped abroad as indentured laborers, and labor migration to the south-central part of West Bengal for rice cultivation was common, as was migration to tea plantations in the Northeast, to coal mines in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, and to jute factories in Kolkata (De Haan 2002; Rogaly 1998, 22; Rogaly et al. 2003; Datta 2016). Although migration for agricultural work from Bihar and West Bengal to Punjab and Haryana had become common by the 1920s, the introduction of the Green Revolution in Northwestern India in the 1960s caused a huge increase of this type of migration (Datta 2016, 204). But in recent times there has been a shift in Bihari out-migration away from rural-to-rural migration, and towards rural-to-urban migration (Datta 2016, 204). Some migrants from my research area still travel to work in rural areas, but these days one in four migrants from Bihar travel to Delhi where they seek jobs in the informal sector (Datta 2016, 212). Delhi is in fact the most popular destination for Bihari labor migrants, and it also draws many migrants from West Bengal. The men insisted that they could earn more money in Delhi than in Kolkata or other cities that were closer than Delhi. In Chapter Five I discuss other labor migration options for men from this region.

In the villages where I conducted fieldwork, it was usually the men who migrated for paid work, and this was in keeping with the North Indian custom of lone men migrating from the household to find work as opposed to families migrating together (De Haan 2002, 122; Datta 2016, 206). Rickshaw men believed that their children should stay in school in their villages where they could receive their education in their mother tongues. As I discuss in Chapter Three, they felt it was improper for women and girls to spend too much time in Delhi because the big city might morally corrupt them. On top of this anxiety, there were economic barriers to bringing their families with them to Delhi. They could not afford to house and feed dependents in Delhi, and the family could not afford to leave agricultural plots untended in the village. For these reasons and more, rickshaw men always migrated without their wives, daughters, or small children (male relatives would, however, sometimes migrate together).

Rickshaw men who practiced circular migration between Delhi and Bihar or West Bengal tended to stay in Delhi for longer periods of time than those who commuted to Delhi from nearer locations like Uttar Pradesh or Haryana. The men usually stayed in Delhi for at least a couple months at a time, and sometimes over six months. Any season was fine for plying a rickshaw, however there were seasonal considerations on the village end. Harvest and planting seasons were often the reason for returning to the village, as were natural disasters like floods and droughts. The men would return to the village in case they or their families became ill, and they also trekked home for weddings, funerals, holidays, when their wives requested help around the house, and to try to improve their relationships with their wives.

My key interlocutors hammered home in interviews the point that they only came to Delhi for money, and that they disliked the city and everything associated with it. They insisted that Delhi was dirty, dangerous, and expensive, and they all looked forward to retiring in the village.

They were marked in Delhi as poor migrant laborers from the countryside by their dress, speech, comportment, and modes of transport, housing, and consumption. They faced discrimination from police and wealthier residents of Delhi. For safety and camaraderie, they stuck together with other migrant men from their villages. Some of them built shelters for themselves, slept on the pavement, or slept in their rickshaws. Others, including all my key interlocutors except for one who was a pavement dweller, rented rooms in very low-income, illegal, or extralegal housing settlements, and they shared their rooms with a handful of other men from their village.

1.4 Conducting Fieldwork with Cycle Rickshaw Men

This dissertation is based on field work carried out during my graduate training which included two summers of pilot studies that preceded the official fieldwork stint that lasted for roughly eighteen months during 2017 and 2018. There are many areas in Delhi where cycle rickshaw men work, and I observed and interviewed them in Old Delhi, Paharganj, University of Delhi, G.T.B Nagar, Karol Bagh, Patparganj, Rohini, Dwarka, and Gurgaon. But as I was staying in South Delhi, it was convenient to concentrate my fieldwork in a single neighborhood there. The South Delhi neighborhood where I worked was not as thick with rickshaw traffic as Jama Masjid or Old Delhi, but there were still rickshaw men on most streets, and it could make finding a quiet place for an interview challenging. The particular street corners and metro stops from which I conducted most of my fieldwork were chosen very unsystematically. I began studying the men who worked from one street corner because there was a coffee shop nearby that had a clean toilet, and this was a luxury that I found difficult to abandon early in my fieldwork when my stomach was still adjusting to local foods and drinks. I also worked closely with the men who waited for

customers at the neighborhood's metro station because sometimes I arrived in the neighborhood by metro train and chatted with the men at the station. Little by little, by following the men around the neighborhood, and by exploring on my own, I discovered the places where rickshaw men liked to hang out, such as at the various roadside restaurants. Although my initiation was haphazard, by the end of my fieldwork I had a good feel for the entire neighborhood, which was roughly three square kilometers, and I knew many rickshaw men who worked in the area.

I do not claim that the experiences of rickshaw men who worked in my South Delhi field site were the same as those of rickshaw men who worked elsewhere. There were significant differences between neighborhoods, for example, in traffic volume, terrain, and the types of customers encountered. The rickshaw men recognized such differences and told me that there was an element of personal preference in choosing a neighborhood in which to work. They also usually pointed out personal connections that had drawn them to work in one area or another, whether it was a relative who was already working there, or an acquaintance with a *thekedaar* or a landlord. Sometimes a sort of chain migration or "accumulation" effect occurred within groups of rickshaw men so that pioneering men from a certain village would establish a foothold in a particular neighborhood, with a particular landlord or *thekedaar*, and other men from their village would then join them there (see Kurosaki et al. 2007, 11). Although there are no studies that I know of that detail the specific geographical clustering of different regional or ethnic groups of cycle rickshaw pullers in and around Delhi, I did observe that such clustering happens so that, for instance, there were more West Bengali rickshaw pullers in my South Delhi field site than were found in some of the other neighborhoods. At the same time, on the basis that they all face many of the same material and structural conditions such as migrant status, sending remittances, class location, lack of advanced formal education, etcetera, rickshaw men can be lumped together (e.g.,

Kurosaki et al. 2012, 11; Ravi 2016a, 95, 204), and my interlocutors thought that there were more commonalities than differences between rickshaw men who migrated from different areas and established work gangs in various colonies in Delhi. Sometimes they would say things like, “All rickshaw men are the same. They are all poor. They all want to fill their stomachs and earn money.” Despite what my interviewees said, my findings may not be generalizable for all rickshaw men, or even for all rickshaw men in Delhi. Although my ethnographic engagements with rickshaw men in scattered corners of Delhi basically support what I found at my main field site in South Delhi, intensive studies of other groups of rickshaw men in other neighborhoods would need to be conducted in order to generalize all the findings in this dissertation.

Village field sites were chosen by asking the men with whom I had built the strongest rapport if I could accompany them when they returned home. I visited villages in the Katihar district of Bihar, and in the Malda district of West Bengal. Halfway through my fieldwork, flooding devastated Bihar and made visiting villages there much more difficult, so most of my village fieldwork was completed in West Bengal. I ended up concentrating my research in a single village in Malda where I built the strongest connections. I visited my village field sites six times for a total of about four months, and I stayed in the homes of key interlocutors, met their families and fellow villagers, and followed them around and participated in their daily lives, including traveling regionally to visit in-laws.

In Delhi, I found new interlocutors by approaching them and chatting with them at street corners, the metro station, and snack stalls. I would also hire unknown rickshaw men to pedal me across the neighborhood, and I would chat with them as they pedaled. The ones who were enthusiastic about participating in my research, and helpful about telling me about their lives and jobs, became my key interlocutors, and I asked them to introduce me to their friends, workmates,

families, and fellow villagers. The men with whom I ended up spending the most time could be divided in two groups — the West Bengalis and the Biharis. I did not set out to specifically study men from these two states, but these were the groups of men with whom I was able to develop the strongest rapport as I began interacting with unknown rickshaw men in the neighborhood. There were several exit gates at the metro station, and the rickshaw men tended to wait for customers by the gates where other rickshaw men who migrated from the same regions waited, however there was also inter-region mixing and camaraderie. At various street corners, groups of rickshaw men would work together based on common village origins. The group of West Bengalis who worked together from an intersection called *Taakat Chawk* had supposedly been working from there for over a decade. Furthermore, half of my key interlocutors were Suni Muslims, and half were Hindus, and this religious divide was represented evenly across regional groups (half the Biharis were Muslims, and half the West Bengalis were Muslims). They ranged in age from twenty-one to sixty-five years, and all but one of them were married. In addition to these key interlocutors, I engaged with many other cycle rickshaw men in South Delhi, and in other parts of Delhi. My field work in Delhi was supplemented with interviews from other people in the rickshaw business like mechanics and *thekedaars*, as well as government officials and other residents of Delhi.

All rickshaw men spoke at least rudimentary Hindi with their customers. The Biharis all spoke Hindi well enough, and in the village in Bihar everyone spoke Hindi as a first or second language. Bengali was the first language of the men from West Bengal, and I did meet a few West Bengalis in Delhi with whom I had difficulty communicating. My key interlocutors, however, had all been working in Delhi for between three and thirty years so they had all become comfortable conversing in Hindi. At first, I paid an interpreter to accompany me on most interviews in Delhi. But as I learned Hindi, I conducted more interviews on my own, and by the end of my fieldwork I

employed interpreters only as a way to double-check my understanding during important follow-up interviews. In the village in West Bengal, I sometimes hired an interpreter, however sometimes it was not possible to arrange for an interpreter in which case my interviews were limited to my key interlocutors and their family and friends who were able to speak Hindi. I was very lucky that the wives of a couple of the rickshaw men in the West Bengal village spoke Hindi fluently because they were from a place in Jharkhand where Hindi is spoken. Quotes from interviewees are taken from transcriptions of recorded interviews. Sometimes I would not audio record conversations with interlocutors, choosing instead to jot them down from memory as soon as I could, usually that same night.

Building basic rapport with the rickshaw men was not difficult but strengthening it to a level that was helpful to my research took time and practice. Rickshaw men read and treated me as a man, and my gender was crucial to the type and depth of rapport that I was able to establish with them (although it became an obstacle when interviewing their wives), however my whiteness and class were often inhibitors. I cannot confidently say that my interlocutors never felt compulsion to participate in my study due to the power of my combined racial and economic attributes relative to theirs. And my whiteness and relative wealthiness did sometimes affect the way that the rickshaw men interacted with me. Rickshaw men tended to be patient and show deference towards me even in situations when I did not deserve it. They looked to me to settle disputes over matters in their village that I could not possibly grasp as an outsider. My relationship with the rickshaw men was primed by, and inflected with, the relations of power and knowledge that were established through colonialism and continue to exist and evolve in contemporary India. That said, I have reason to believe that racial and economic barriers were seldom decisive. In Delhi, the nature of the job made the men highly mobile and allowed them to pedal away from me

whenever they did not feel like talking or being observed. To my frustration, they would sometimes pedal off on the flimsiest excuses when I was trying to interview them. Because of that, I believe that most of them sat for interviews in Delhi only when they felt like it. It is possible that the men felt some compulsion to host me in their villages, but they nonchalantly handed off their hosting duties to a relative, friend, or neighbor when something else required their attention or when they needed the space in their home for another purpose. I happily shifted from one host to another at their requests as it helped me become familiar with many households, and it reduced the strain on any individual host.

Sometimes my bonds with interlocutors were strengthened very quickly, as was the case once when Panchim allowed me to pedal his rickshaw while he sat in the back.⁴ I pedaled the wrong way down the shoulder of a one-way street in which the motor vehicle traffic had become jammed to a standstill. Traffic in Delhi is famously chaotic, and all types of drivers, including cycle rickshaw drivers, commonly disregard formal traffic rules whenever it pleases them, and whenever they can get away with it. The back wheel of our rickshaw snagged the bumper of a car that was parked perpendicular to the sidewalk and ripped it halfway off the car. Just as this happened, Panchim and I realized that there was a police jeep in the oncoming traffic and the officers sitting inside it had watched the minor destruction that I had caused to the parked vehicle with awestruck expressions on their faces. Panchim swiftly took control of the rickshaw and pedaled us past the police jeep which was stuck in the traffic jam and unable to pursue us. When

⁴ All names used for people in this dissertation are pseudonyms.

we were safely away from the scene of the crime, we could not stop laughing about it and it continued to be a point of solidarity in our relationship for many months.⁵

Usually though, building rapport with rickshaw men happened more gradually. It involved hanging out with them where they waited for customers and joining in their horseplay and banter (see Chapter Four). And accompanying the men to their rooms in Delhi to help prepare and share their nightly meal greatly boosted my status as someone who was trustworthy and “an alright guy” (*sahi aadmi*). My visits to the men’s villages also helped improve rapport, and sometimes in Delhi rickshaw men with whom I had stayed in the village would tell other rickshaw men who were suspicious of me that I had visited their village and stayed in their home in order to prove that I was trustworthy.

Sometimes rapport came unexpectedly. For instance, I started pedaling a rickshaw myself, and taxiing my own customers, not to build rapport, but to experience what the work was like and to better understand the customers and the rickshaw contractors. But soon after I started working alongside the men, they reduced their requests to borrow money from me, and they opened up about details of their earnings and the minutiae of transactions with customers. At the beginning of my fieldwork, I worried that working alongside rickshaw pullers would be diverting potential earnings from men who needed the money much more than I did. As I became familiar with the

⁵ I felt some remorse for the damage that I caused to the parked car, and it is true that my accident put Panchim at increased risk. On a different occasion, as a different rickshaw man and I chatted on the sidewalk in Old Delhi, police charged at us and started beating the rickshaw man. I managed to stop the police from hitting him and explained that the rickshaw man was helping me. The police told me that they had assumed that the rickshaw man was trying to con me since I appeared to be a foreigner and rickshaw men were supposedly notorious for conning foreigners. The risk of police violence was ever-present for cycle rickshaw men (see Ravi 2016a) and existed whether I was a tourist haggling with the rickshaw man over a ride, or whether I was a researcher conducting an interview. I warned interlocutors of this risk, but they were unfazed and one of them stated, “Police keep hitting people. Police do this. They always do this to us.” On multiple occasions I saw police mercilessly and arbitrarily beating rickshaw men who I did not know. My presence may have heightened the risk of police violence in certain situations, but the fact is that violence from police, as well as violence from motorists and other civilians in Delhi, toward rickshaw men is an almost constant threat even when there is no ethnographer around. Even so, I tried to conduct interviews in spaces where police were less frequently present.

rhythms of the workday, and with the men's understandings of the need to minimize their labor performance (see Chapter Two), I saw that this was not an issue. A lot of times, customers were given to me by rickshaw men after they had spoken with the customer and learned the desired destination and the fare that the customer was willing to pay and decided that they did not want to take the trip. Sometimes I would do split trips with my interlocutors, transporting a party of customers that was too big to fit in a single rickshaw in a caravan of rickshaws. Arguably, my participation in these split trips increased the earnings that were possible for my interlocutors, and it seemed to raise my status in their eyes.

The question about whether and how to compensate rickshaw men for their participation in my research was unavoidable, especially since I was often actively diverting them from their regular labor when I asked them to sit for interviews. To counter the infrequent but aggressive requests by a small minority of the men for large cash loans or gifts, I strategically highlighted my own economic precarity (although I do not think that they were convinced). Usually, however, I openly admitted to the rickshaw men that I was richer than them and that I would probably economically benefit in the future from the research that I was conducting. Most of them recognized as much without needing me to explain it. I would treat my interlocutors to tea, chewing tobacco, and snacks, and buy groceries and alcohol when we ate dinner together (see Chapter Four). I do not, however, see that alone as just compensation. Too many ethnographers believe that meals, souvenirs from the West, or copies of photographs that they take of their interlocutors are sufficient forms of repayment for the contributions that their interlocutors make to their research. I paid my interlocutors, and I believe it would have been harmful, and plainly immoral, not to. Rickshaw men in Delhi were interested in foreigners as a source of money before I arrived, and they would continue to be whether or not I paid them. Did the men tell me what they thought

I wanted to hear? Perhaps so, but they might have done so even if I was not paying them. The idea that compensating interlocutors taints the scientific merit of research is suspect (as if “pure” science is possible or even desirable for studying culture). For semi-structured, recorded interviews that lasted between one and two hours I paid one hundred and fifty or two hundred rupees, which was between one third and two thirds of the men’s total daily earnings. Never did I have men pressure or pester me to conduct an interview with them, even when they knew that I would pay them for it. If anything, I needed to track the men down and repeatedly gently ask them to give an interview. Many of the interviews that I started were abandoned when my interviewee took a phone call from his family or from a regular customer who was summoning him from somewhere nearby. When I traveled with a rickshaw man back to his village, I bought his train ticket for him. For hosting me in their homes in the village, I paid the men about five hundred rupees per night, which was about what a cheap guest house in the region would charge per night and was equivalent to a good day’s earnings for a poor man from the village.

During my fieldwork, a young white woman, allegedly from England, came to an area where rickshaw men congregated and promised to purchase new rickshaws for about fifty men who were currently renting their rickshaws. Months later, by the end of my fieldwork, the promise was unfulfilled, and the men were not optimistic that she would eventually follow through. Moreover, some of the men told me that if they were gifted a rickshaw of their own, they would sell it for cash and continue renting their rickshaw because owning a rickshaw can be a liability when returning to the village. My point is that rickshaw men should be supported by giving them something that they actually say they need. My interlocutors said that they needed money, and to anthropologists who say that I am gullible or naive for giving it to them, I say that it is more naive to claim that our research poses a challenge to social inequality while we blatantly exploit the

people who we study. As it were, a few rickshaw men refused compensation entirely, insisting that we were friends and that our relationship was more than transactional.

Several of the ethnographic vignettes provided in this dissertation have been left ragged at the edges to intimate their situated-ness in the men's lives — lives that encompass more than the theoretical foci of this dissertation. Chapter Five is meant as an experiment in demonstrating the complexity and diversity of rickshaw men's lives, and as a kind of argument against reductive portrayals of them. It provides minimal theoretical analysis and instead focuses on narratives that show rickshaw men living beyond the image that "rickshaw man" conjures, and indeed beyond what most literature on rickshaw men includes. I have added ethnographic details that are, I believe, extraneous to the frameworks of labor, migration, and masculinity. These details, by mere virtue of their inclusion, will not necessarily provoke useful alternate interpretations of rickshaw men's lives, but they might, and it is this possibility that I mean to create by providing them. Naturally, broadening the framework by providing extra ethnographic details still begs the questions of what is not included and why, and I think these are fine questions to keep in play if we are serious about constructing better ways of understanding rickshaw men.

1.5 A Look Ahead

In Chapter Two, I examine rickshaw men's labor and labor avoidance to reveal their multiple masculine priorities, and how these priorities can be understood as in competition with one another. Rickshaw men believed that their obligation to be good earners for their families conflicted with their duty to sexually satisfy their wives. This conflict played out at the embodied level, and I discuss rickshaw men's ideas about the bodily effects of their labor activity, as well as

their anxieties about their sexual health. The point is to show that even when they are on the job, their labor (in)activity needs to be interpreted as a statement of the kind of men they wish to be besides being working men.

Chapter Three is about the intimate heterosexual relationships that rickshaw men practiced or fantasized about while they were in Delhi. I explore their intimate relationships with three types of women — wives, sex workers, and rickshaw passengers. I find each type of intimate relationship influenced in its own way how the men performed their labor or when and why they migrated. The men's heterosexuality was very much an expression of their masculinity, and since it was front and center in each case, I argue that rickshaw pullers cannot be understood as workers or migrants without appreciating them as sexual and desirous men. The chapter also demonstrates how multiple intimate relationships may combine to support and shape a single industry.

Chapter Four is an exploration of the relationships between rickshaw men in Delhi. I examine their competition and cooperation, sharing, humor and horseplay, cohabitation, and how they support one another during crises. The men bent the rules of caste and community to support one another. But instead of a general class solidarity developing across communal divisions, what I find is that rickshaw pullers were likely to lend support across communal lines to other migrant men from their village, but not to unknown people. Hence, I theorize that they operated according to a “man-of-the-village” masculinity which required that men from the same village support one another especially when they were outside their village. The rickshaw men, I argue, cannot be understood within the labor migration circuit, unless their village brotherhood is taken into account.

Chapter Five follows the men back home to their villages. Its details are presented as a chronological narrative that unfolds on a single visit to one village, however I draw from all of my

fieldwork in my multiple visits to the villages to compose it. Devoting more space to narrative and ethnography than to theory and history, the chapter tries to show the evolving, complicated, multi-directional ways in which the men's lives unfold outside of their work as rickshaw pullers. The point is to present them as complex and diverse, as humans. I highlight their family lives and their projects aimed at achieving more comfortable futures for themselves and their children. I also touch upon their spiritual lives, how they spent their leisure time, and what cultural change in the village may look like without advancing any strong conclusions about any of these topics. The chapter's ethnographic vignettes support the idea that masculinity is an abiding theme in the men's lives, while its open-endedness is intended to signal a life beyond labor, migration, or masculinity that is too expansive and rich to capture in a single study. Chapter Six then provides some concluding thoughts.

2.0 Work is Mandaa

Just after lunchtime, I pedaled past a row of cycle rickshaws parked along the edge of a quiet, shady backstreet. Their tattered vinyl canopies were supported by a small forest of steel bars coated with flaking royal blue paint and dust. The tangle of bars suspended steel panels and multi-colored vinyl seats atop sets of thin bicycle wheels, and it all gave the impression of a jungle-gym streetscape or a sprawling and jumbled bicycle parking rack. The rickshaw men were napping on their machines, their feet up on the handlebars or lying on the back seats with their heads, arms, and legs hanging off at weird angles.

I wanted to find potential interviewees who were not napping, so I headed for the market. My rickshaw swayed and rattled as I maneuvered it over potholes, and I muttered a small prayer that the old rusty contraption would hold together. The traffic swelled and swarmed as I veered onto a commercial street. The bicycle bell attached to my handlebars provided a comically poor challenge to the blaring car and motorcycle horns. My fieldwork was completed before the COVID-19 pandemic began, but non-rickshaw-pulling friends had encouraged me to wear a dust mask while working on the street with cycle rickshaw pullers. I had decided against it, reasoning that it would put (even more) cultural distance between myself and my study participants who did not wear them, and it would deprive me of the “real” experience. More than once I second-guessed that reasoning, but even today as the peaking sun congealed with the dust and exhaust, turning the air thick, I realized that a mask would have made it difficult for me to shout to other people in traffic the way that was needed: “Go forward a little!” “The market is that way.” “Bastard, what are you doing!?”

A couple of cycle rickshaw men who were hauling customers passed me. They were drenched in sweat, breathing hard, muscles straining against the weight of their passengers. One of them got down from his cycle seat and had to walk his rickshaw up an inclining street, leaning forward and using his own weight to help drag along his rickshaw and the customers sitting in it. Even when many cycle rickshaw pullers rested—e.g., late at night, just after lunchtime, or during the pouring rain—others could always be found working hard. The same conditions that could disincline some rickshaw men from working, like hot weather or flooded streets, could also encourage customer demand for rickshaw services.

By the time I reached *Taakat Chawk*—the busy intersection near the market that had become one of my regular field sites—I was also dripping with sweat, and my back ached despite having not even carried any passengers. A cycle rickshaw puller who I recognized walked over and silently helped himself to a drink from the water bottle that was resting in the wire basket fixed to the front of my rickshaw’s handlebars. I asked him how work was going, and I listened to his answer as I drank the remainder of the bottle that he handed back to me: “Work is very slow (*kaam bahut mandaa hai*).” And just then he darted back to his rickshaw in time to greet a customer, and he pedaled off with them.

A rickshaw man called Niza was also at the intersection, lounging in the backseat of his rickshaw and staring listlessly into the grinding traffic. He regarded me with a slightly bemused expression as a few loud and unnecessarily long honks from nearby traffic helped set the mood. After one louder and still longer honk he said, “let’s go [to the] village.” He threw his head a little bit as he said it, as if to point to his village *back there*, and a smile shot across his face to signal, I believe, that his remark was a wish or a joke more than a serious suggestion. I teased, “Don’t you have to work?” Unbothered, he rebutted, “Work is slow,” and invited me to sit with him. But as I

relaxed with him, I watched the rickshaw man who had helped himself to my water hustle past us carrying his third load of passengers in an hour. I commented that the passing rickshaw man was doing a lot of hard work. Niza agreed, then added, “But his body will dry out” (*lekin uska sharir sukh jaaega*). I asked what it mattered, and he remarked that “[It] will matter to [his] wife” (*bibi ko fark pardega*). He slyly toggled his eyebrows up and down to convey that he meant something sexual.

Hoping for a lecture about the appropriate way to attract customers, I suggested to Niza that he needed to call to potential passengers and invite them to ride with him. But he made no comment and instead fetched some biscuits from his basket and tried to feed them to a dog. He was playing with the dog when another cycle rickshaw puller named Panchim, who we both knew, wandered up to us and leaned against Niza’s rickshaw. Panchim’s wife had died last year, and he was planning to return to her natal village in Assam to search for a new wife because, as he assured me, there were many beautiful unmarried women there. Panchim casually mentioned to us that the brother of his deceased wife had died yesterday in Assam. He said he would not attend the funeral because he was not very close with him plus, of course, he needed to keep earning in Delhi to support his children. Then he asked me if dead people are buried or cremated in my country. I told him that both methods are practiced, while some people even donate their bodies to science. A funny discussion ensued wherein Panchim mentioned how he had just read that graves were being robbed in Bihar to sell the bodies to science. Niza added that a politician in West Bengal had donated her head to science so that her brain could be studied. From there, the topic shifted to cannibals in Nagaland, and I went back to my rickshaw wishing I could just observe something about the job of cycle rickshaw pulling. But hadn’t I?

2.1 Introduction

Except for Panchim, all of my key interlocutors were married, and they were all expected to be the breadwinners for their wives and children in their immediate households. Even Panchim, despite being a widower, was still expected to provide for his children. The men appeared committed to their roles as breadwinners seeing that their whole mission in coming to Delhi was to remit as much money as possible to their families, yet I spent many lazy afternoons with them that made it seem as though their commitments were anything but firm.

My ethnographic research shows that their ambivalence about working at every opportunity stemmed from a popular belief among rickshaw men that operating a cycle rickshaw “dries out” the body such that it decreases one’s sexual fitness. Pedaling a rickshaw was an activity in which the masculine project of being sexually fit was pitted against the masculine ideal of being a proper breadwinner. I argue that when rickshaw men privilege the former over the latter, instead of a bid for easier working conditions or any such laborism, it is better understood as anti-productivism. Productivism is the view that human activity has no higher purpose than to generate the maximum amount of any given commodity, and as a bourgeois meta-narrative it disallows recognition of the value of activities or inactivities which do not directly or indirectly increase production.

My analysis is informed by autonomist Marxists’ critique of productivism which points out that Marxism argues for liberation *of* labor, but not liberation *from* labor (Baudrillard 1975; Postone 1993). A dialectical framing of the problem in which the bourgeoisie and proletariat are locked in conflict over the ownership of labor prohibits examination of whether, and how much, labor is good and necessary. Autonomist Marxism does not base its analysis around dialectics such as labor-versus-capital or alienation-versus-ownership. Such dialectics are abstract structural pairs

that are meant to oppose one another but on closer inspection each serves to validate the other's immutability. Autonomist Marxists trade a concern with dialectics for a focus on "antagonisms" present in the lived struggles of actual people (Weeks 2011, 96). This shift from dialectics to antagonisms signals a, "struggle for a separation from the object of critique. Separation is conceived as something different from dialectical conflict; resistance born of separation is imagined more along lines of flight than lines of opposition" (Weeks 2011, 95).

It is tempting to see the dilemma, described in detail below, that rickshaw men experience between breadwinning and sexual fitness, as just another version of the familiar work/rest balancing act. But a view of the men's lives that is bifurcated between expending and restoring/conserving labor power primes us to judge their social value only in terms of the labor that they do or do not do. Avoiding this pitfall will go a long way towards my overall project of creating an image of my informants as men on cycle rickshaws instead of just cycle rickshaw pullers — that is, men whose lives have meaning that extends beyond their jobs. With this in mind, I suggest that a seesawing match between the depletion and replenishment of productive powers is not a viable framework for analysis when labor activity is seen to rob the laborer not only of their energy to keep working, but also of a critical means of reproducing their labor.⁶ When returning home to perform well in his sexual role is exactly that for which the rickshaw man has been not working, then it is imperative to achieve analytical "separation" from the dialectic of productive-versus-reproductive-labor. To this end, I focus on the "antagonism" between rickshaw

⁶ Reproductive labor can refer to activities related to procreation and repopulating of the workforce, and to activities related to replenishing the energy that workers expend daily at work. The latter is more relevant to my case study since most of the men I met were already fathers and were not interested in having more children. Thus, I use reproductive labor to index activities—especially those involved in the fulfillment of sexual needs—insofar as they are related to sustaining the rickshaw man and his wife's marriage-as-economic-unit, and to restoring their capacities to continue working.

men's masculine duties of breadwinning and sexual fitness, and I explore their attempts not just to avoid work, but to replace it with the masculine project of remaining sexually fit. While rickshaw men make it clear that their sexual fitness is important to their sense of manhood, it is not my purpose to define all the things that sex can mean to them. Instead, I build a case for why their ideas about the relationship between their labor and their sexual fitness render problematic the productive-versus-reproductive-labor dialectic, and I highlight what their sexual fitness cannot be—namely, an unambiguous compliment to their productive labor—to open one such “line of flight” from the paradigm of productivism.

Scholars have explored the gendered features of refusal-to-work politics with regards to women's structural positions within Western capitalist and late-capitalist societies (McRobbie 2011; Weeks 2011).⁷ My research builds on this understanding of anti-productivism as a gendered phenomenon by connecting it with the rapidly growing field of masculinities studies; I pay special attention to rickshaw men's anti-productivist tendencies in relation to their masculine positions as breadwinners. But beyond contextualizing anti-productivism within the gendered division of labor, my research contributes to a new understanding of anti-productivism by describing how the refusal to work can emerge as a response when the embodied consequences of labor performance are at odds with the worker's concept of the proper gendered body. The rickshaw men minimized their labor activity because they believed that working would render their bodies less manly. Their partial refusal of work was accordingly voiced not as a reclamation of time, or even simply energy,

⁷ My use of “politics” is not restricted to parties or social movements, but pertains to a broad range of formal and informal spheres of activity, encompassing individuals' day-to-day micro practices — practices that might not be self-consciously political — and their consequences for the direction or compulsion of human behavior and thought. For more on “everyday” politics, see Kalb (1997).

but as an effort to preserve their bodies as viable resources for meeting gender ideals that existed at least somewhat independent of any economic function.

A few studies have explored anti-productivism in the West within certain classes (Paulsen 2014; Apostolidis 2018), but how other types of workers elsewhere may affect an anti-productivist stance represents relatively uncharted academic territory. High-quality ethnographic studies of labor-class, informal, or “footloose” Indian workers abound (e.g., Breman 1996; Agarwala 2013; Doron 2013; Anjaria 2016), and they provide important insights by variously highlighting workers’ struggles for economic survival and their tactics for claiming safer, better, and more work. While they scrutinize the quality of available work, such studies do not, however, critique work itself which therefore hangs in the backdrop, implicitly, as ubiquitous, given, and unquestionable. If the humanity of Indians is incongruent with the demands of productivism, then perusal of the academic literature on contemporary Indian workers is unlikely to leave readers any the wiser.

My research provides a check on this streak of productivist assumptions by examining anti-productivism among low-caste petty entrepreneurs in India’s informal economy. Rickshaw men express a particular version of regionally popular notions about bodies drying out, and it construes their breadwinning and sexual health as incompatible. My explanation of this offers the anthropology of work an understanding of how clashes between gender ideals played out at the somatic level in culturally particular terms can determine workers’ engagement with, and disengagement from, their labor. In considering the lives of men in South Asia within an anti-productivist framework, I do not claim that their views of their labor must follow a set of politics that were developed in the West. What I claim is that rickshaw men’s own ideas about labor present

cracks in the productivist cosmology; they present an Indian version, if you like, of anti-productivism.

2.2 Background

I have heard of exploitative contractors in other cities, but Delhi's cycle rickshaw industry hardly resembled the hotbed of exploitation described in Kolkata's hand-pulled rickshaw industry in Lapierre's *City of Joy* (1985). I have never heard a first-hand account from a rickshaw man of on-going mistreatment, coercion, or hyper-exploitation at the hands of his *thekedaar* in Delhi, and many have argued that the relationships between rickshaw men and contractors in Delhi are not exploitative (see Kurosaki et al. 2012, 45; Ravi 2013, 125; Tiwari 2014, 84-85). *Thekedaar* often have prior work experience in other areas of the cycle rickshaw industry, as mechanics or having operated a cycle rickshaw themselves (Kurosaki et al. 2012, 29). *Thekedaar* own anywhere from a couple rickshaws to a fleet of over two hundred, and most own between twenty and seventy. Men who migrated to Delhi for work were customarily introduced to their *thekedaar* through someone who the *thekedaar* trusted, such as a rickshaw man who had been renting from the *thekedaar* for a long time. Lacking this trust-based introduction, a new rickshaw man would almost certainly be required to give his *thekedaar* a sizable security deposit in exchange for a rickshaw rental because the *thekedaar* would fear that the rickshaw man would steal the rickshaw. Most of my *thekedaar*'s renters did not pay any security deposit, since they were introduced through someone who the *thekedaar* trusted. *Thekedaar* often provided other services to rickshaw men like extending them credit and arranging housing for them. Some of my interlocutors took small loans from their *thekedaar* (although they preferred to take loans from friends and relatives in their

village), but none of them received housing from their *thekedaar*. It should be emphasized that the industry is run largely on trust between the rickshaw men and the *thekedaar*, and partly for this reason rickshaw men rent from the same *thekedaar* every day, however, over the years, they may switch to a new *thekedaar* for a variety of reasons.

Many rickshaw men regarded their contractors as friends and argued that they were good people who provided poor men with opportunities. A rickshaw man is quoted as saying, “It is incorrect to conclude that all rickshaw owners exploit the cycle rickshaw pullers, though there would be [a] few exceptional cases. A cycle rickshaw owner is dependent on [the] cycle rickshaw puller for his own livelihood and hence would make efforts to ensure a cycle rickshaw puller’s wellbeing instead of thinking of exploiting him” (Ravi 2013, 125). And one of my interlocutors told me, “If something happens, I call my *thekedaar* and he picks up. If the police seize the rickshaw, if I get into an accident, if anything happens, he will help. He gives me a lot of help. If someone is sick, if someone has a fever, he looks after us.” These sentiments obviously do not prove the absence of exploitation, but they at least help show that the rickshaw men did not see their *thekedaar* as taking advantage of them. Some men even became small-time contractors, purchasing two or three rickshaws to rent out while continuing to also pedal a rickshaw themselves. The pressure on rickshaw men to work was irreducible to their relationships with their contractors. Furthermore, what passengers were willing to pay impacted, yet did not determine, the workload that rickshaw men took on, and this was illustrated by the many instances in which I observed rickshaw men’s indifference towards taxiing customers who offered higher fares. My research shows that beyond their struggles with stingy passengers, rickshaw men’s work productivity was heavily influenced by their antagonistic masculine priorities.

For this chapter, I consider rickshaw men's labor as simply hauling customers from one place to another, hence the commodity that they produce is a transport service. This definition is in line with the way that most rickshaw men talked about their labor: "We carry passengers here and there, that's it" (*ham savaariyaa idar-oodar le jaata hain, bas*). Their labor may, however, be defined in less narrow terms. Perhaps they also manufactured some kind emotional experience for their passengers, and if that were the case then their anti-productivism would apply to that production role, too, when they refused to take fares.⁸ An expanded view of transport workers' labor is evident in literature like that on cab drivers in South Africa where it is observed that they become absorbed in a range of patron-client activities with their co-workers. These activities, such as procuring licenses and helping each other buy cabs, are essential to becoming a "Big Man" in the South African cab industry (see Gibbs 2014). A culture of patron-client relationships does not exist between rickshaw men; however, their labor might be thought to include having their rickshaws repaired, cleaning their rickshaws, and cultivating relationships with their mechanics and *thekedaar*. Likewise, many rickshaw men have side hustles including running errands for shopkeepers and residents and touting for various businesses. Rickshaw men must take time during their workdays to do all these things, but when they turn down customers to attend to them, I am not arguing that it is necessarily anti-productivism. These activities may dovetail with the anti-productivist project of avoiding hauling customers around, which is to say that they could be excuses for not accepting passengers. But since they can also easily be construed as part of production, I do not include them as evidence of a culture of anti-productivism. I am more interested in moments when recreation, leisure, or inactivity that would be normally considered

⁸ Rickshaw pullers did produce a sort of emotional experience for their riders by cultivated stances of deference and diligence and, as I discuss in the following chapter, they effaced their masculine heterosexuality when dealing with female customers, but none of it was seen as part of the job or a requisite skill for performing their labor.

laziness were chosen over carrying passengers; when attending to other labor activities or side hustles were clearly not the reason for declining to carry passengers. Such moments include those rests and breaks that are conventionally viewed by scholars as serving the reproduction of labor power. This assumed framework for analysis of a binary universe of productive-reproductive activities is exactly what I wish to critique in this chapter.

A productivist meta-narrative guides most analyses of the worktime (in)activities of transport workers like cycle rickshaw pullers. In a historical study of the rickshaw pullers of Singapore, Warren observes that rickshaw men were their own bosses, and sometimes elected not to carry passengers. “Not surprisingly,” he comments, “rickshaw men were regarded as being slackers of sorts, despite their capacity for hard work when things got busy around the city. They were accustomed to the work schedule of their day being somewhat elastic - punctuated with trips, rest breaks, more trips, and mealtimes....pullers tended to shorten the hottest part of the working day with a timely nap in the rickshaw, or just head home in the face of a cold, hard, ankle-deep downpour” (Warren 1986, 187). In their defense, he says, “...it was physically impossible to work around the clock all the time. They were not machines and even the best had to rest sometimes” (Warren 1986, 187). This model, where the “best” rickshaw pullers are ones who approach machine-like output, underpins Warren’s assumption that for rickshaw men, “the value of time was synonymous with money” (Warren 1986, 187).

Another example of the way that productivist ideology shapes the analysis of transport workers comes from Sopranzetti’s (2013) study of motorcycle taxi drivers in contemporary Bangkok. He finds that during political uprisings that demanded a democratic government, motorcycle taxi drivers in Bangkok had unique control over the flow of goods and passengers throughout the city making them key political actors. But these extraordinary moments where

workers become people who care about something besides work are an exception in Sopranzetti's analysis that prove his productivist bias. Normally, when the drivers are eking out a living in the post-Fordist workscape, they are only seen as providers of vital infrastructure, and things like masculinity and village ideals are considered only insofar as they shape the work-savviness of drivers. The most frustrating part of Sopranzetti's interesting dissertation is that he also theorizes the motorcycle taxi drivers' non-work time as productive labor. When they are not providing taxi services, when they are sitting around waiting for customers, when they are chatting with people in the neighborhood — all is theorized as “phatic labor” by which a latent infrastructure is supposedly produced. For a productivist who sympathizes with precarious workers and wants to portray them as socially valuable, there is no other path than to exalt their laboring energy and make excuses for their idleness. On this path, it could ironically be the deepest sympathies that lead to the most distorted pictures of humanity.

All of the rickshaw men who I studied had a foundational masculine duty to be breadwinners—i.e., primary financial providers—for their immediate and sometimes extended families. It is probably not an overstatement to say that their most important duty as men was commonly regarded as providing material support for their families. Many men spoke about the necessity of working and earning for their families. As one of them put it,

Here in the village, men and women have different responsibilities. Women stay home, take care of the home, the kids, the animals, everything. Poor men have to go outside to find work. Men make a good name for themselves by going outside for work and sending money home.

Women in the village reported the same, emphasizing men's responsibility to earn and remit money. Although some North Indians practice labor migration for extra-economic reasons (e.g., Shah 2006), the men with whom I spoke were adamant that “Delhi is a very bad place” and

they would rather be home with their families.⁹ By far, their single most important motivation in migrating to Delhi was the pressure to provide economic support to their families. Pressure was exerted through phone calls by wives and family members demanding increased remittances, by the fear that dissatisfied wives may leave them, by expenses such as children's school fees and wedding arrangements, by creditors, and by the desire to maintain a good reputation. Breadwinning is a chief duty for men from West Bengal where it has been promoted through state regulations and exclusions of women from the workforce (De Haan 1994). It is likely becoming the pan-Indian dominant form of masculinity (Osella and Osella 2006, 5). However, the very idea that males are breadwinners can be an ethnocentric assumption (Jackson, 2001, 12-13), and "the reach of hegemonic/dominant gender models ('breadwinner', 'householder') has to be tested against lived experiences" (Osella and Osella 2006, 74).

Broadly speaking, hard work is respected among male migrant laborers in Delhi, and scholars have recognized that companies' production goals and workers' masculine ideals converge in their mutual valorization of hard, tireless work (Derickson 2014; Ramaswami 2012). Conditions arise, though, under which it becomes unsustainable for male laborers to cling to the ideal of hard work, and they are compelled to reconsider the relationship between their labor and their self-respect (Ramaswami 2012, 234). Male porters in China called *bang-bang* are known to dignify their masculinity by resisting performing deference to customers who they find treat them poorly (Zhang, 2011, 122). And motorized rickshaw driving in Kolkata exerts a "dual pull on the gendered subjectivities" of the drivers by paying poorly enough to make the middle-class breadwinner ideal seem out of reach, yet simultaneously providing space that drivers use for

⁹ They dislike the people, the overcrowding, the pollution, their housing, the food, and even the taste of the water in Delhi. Given the chance, none would relocate to Delhi, and they all preferred to retire in their villages.

cultivating masculine modes of camaraderie and leisure (Chowdhury 2019, 15). Indeed, some factory workers in Chhattisgarh slack off to such a degree that they effectively mix and merge their laboring and non-laboring lives (Parry 1999). The breadwinner ideal is obviously not necessarily opposed to other masculine projects, however the ethnographic literature describes instances where tension comes between them; boatmen in Banaras find it difficult to reconcile their breadwinning with their manly habit of alcohol consumption (Doron 2011, 102), and male Pakistani labor migrants are unable to fulfill their sexual fantasies while employed at low-paying service jobs (Ahmad 2009, 320). A few publications show how acts of resistance in the working sphere can be attempts to shift work/life balances. For example, Malay men manifest a “counterhegemonic masculinity” born from the relation between their economic (in)activities and their kinship duties. They are said to appropriate and identify with stereotypes of working-class men that depict them as unable to fulfill their economic responsibilities to their kinfolk (Peletz 1994). And Hickey’s (2010) dissertation shows how taxi men in Bangkok use masculine ideals from their village to resist working in the city in the way that capital and the state demands of them. To describe this struggle, she uses the language of “nested hegemonic masculinities” (Hickey 2010, 192). These studies provide valuable descriptions of the linkages between masculinity and labor, however they stop short of conceiving of anti-productivist forms of manhood. I am not claiming that rickshaw men did not base their worth as men, at least partially, on earning for their families. Even among my study’s small sample, there were some who would not admit to doing anything other than working as hard as possible to maximize their remittances (a fact that strengthens my view of rickshaw men’s breadwinning as a type of prescribed male productivism). What I argue instead is that some rickshaw men took seriously a type of manhood

based on sexual fitness, and their understanding was that it existed in opposition to their breadwinning labor.¹⁰

2.3 Mandaa Discourse

When asked how work was going, rickshaw men regularly told me that it was slow, non-existent, or down (*mandaa*) in the sense that customers, especially those who were willing to pay normal fare rates, were relatively scarce. Men in some industries sometimes use special discourses to characterize their labor (Chari 2004), and all my key interlocutors participated in the “work is *mandaa*” discourse. By calling it a discourse I mean to invoke the way that truth-value and power are rolled together (Foucault 1980) such that it imposes a baseline shared knowledge about the job that is actively maintained, affirmed, and mobilized by the men. I came to expect that if I questioned an unknown rickshaw man about his job, he would respond with the same nearly automatic argot: “work is *mandaa*.”

Given the power imbalances between myself and the rickshaw men, I wondered if I myself was the primary intended audience of the discourse, if cultivating my sympathy or charity was its *raison d'être*. Over time, although I did not keep records of every material exchange or request for assistance, it did not seem that men were inventing a lull in their workday with the *mandaa* discourse just to extract money from me. On the other hand, rickshaw pullers regularly lounge

¹⁰ None of my interlocutors specifically complained that other types of labor created an embodied conflict of gender ideals like the one described in this chapter (although more research is necessary). However, it seems that there is no conflict between hard labor and sexual fitness for most Indian men. The two are not necessarily at odds, and many men engaged in other types of labor can embody both ideals comfortably. For more on the relationship between Indian men’s physical activity and the embodiment of health and sexual fitness, see Alter (1992) and Baas (2016).

with one another in the same rickshaw without worrying about missing customers, and they never seemed shy or hesitant about shooing me away when they were intent on getting fares and thought that my presence would interfere. This was especially notable near the exit to the metro station where they would frantically call and coax potential customers to ride with them. In these situations, my informants would take me by the shoulders with both of their hands and physically move me off to the side where they instructed me to wait while the wave of metro riders were exiting the station. The problem of compensating the men and negotiating power imbalances with them remains just that — a problem. Nevertheless, scenes like that at the metro station suggest that cycle rickshaw pullers will not always choose ingratiating themselves with an anthropologist over trying to get customers.

Rickshaw men presented an array of off-the-cuff explanations for why work was sluggish, such as the local market being open or closed. They also cited problems of too many rickshaw men, cold weather, hot weather, dry weather, wet weather, and upcoming festivals. As if this was not confusing enough, some mentioned that battery-powered rickshaws were eating into their business.¹¹ Moreover, the discourse did not always, or even usually, match up with what I saw. That is, men would claim that “work is *mandaa*” even when, by any fair measure, it was not. They would refuse service to all types of would-be riders, including wealthier-looking ones, often without bothering to ascertain the desired destination, let alone haggle a price. Some men would decline customers and insist that work was slow even when others working from the same location were so busy that they barely had time to mop the sweat from their faces and catch their breath between customers. By the same token, I noticed that use of the discourse was not always inversely

¹¹ The *mandaa* discourse was in full usage in my field sites before battery-powered rickshaws were introduced. When I completed my fieldwork, there were only two or three battery-powered rickshaws operating in my field sites, and their impact on the cycle rickshaw men’s business was marginal.

proportional to labor output and earnings; while those who might be suspected of slacking leveraged the *mandaa* discourse, those eagerly taxiing many customers sometimes also used it as if they foresaw some problem in affirming their hard work.¹²

To understand the purpose of the discourse, I got Niza to pedal me and my interpreter, Jain, from *Taakat Chawk* to a quiet shady street where we conducted a formal interview with my audio recorder rolling. Niza sat with me in the backseat and Jain perched on the bicycle seat in the front. As time passed, we shifted, taking turns standing or sharing the backseat, and we passed a liter of soda between us. Most cycle rickshaw pullers preferred to chew tobacco mixed with lime powder or a similar, more synthetic, version called *gutka*. A minority of them smoked the cheap “desi” cigarettes called *bidi*. However, Niza’s vice of choice (or “timepass,” as he called it) were “fancy” Gold Flake and Marlboro cigarettes. When we met a couple years earlier, he told me he did not smoke, and when we ran into one another he would quickly throw his cigarette away and seem embarrassed. He was embarrassed about smoking because he was part of a very conservative Muslim community who viewed smoking as a sign of moral corruption, and he was probably afraid that I might hold similar values and judge him negatively. I told him several times that I did not care if he smoked, and he finally became comfortable enough that he enjoyed a cigarette during our interview. Niza was forty-nine years old and wore sandals, simple gray trousers, and a smart-looking short-sleeved plaid collared shirt buttoned around his substantial belly which his workmates made sport of, poking it, squeezing it, asking him when his baby was due.

Jain, a thirty-five year old man, held a master’s degree in journalism, and was completing another master’s degree in law from a prestigious university in Delhi. He was a native to Delhi,

¹² I believe that the discourse was sometimes used to convey a basic dislike of the job regardless of earnings. In such cases the discourse appeared in the same breath as statements like, “this is lowly work” (*ye chota kaam hai*) or “this work is not good” (*ye kaam accha nahi hai*).

had brown skin, presented racially as a “mainstream” Indian, and was what rickshaw pullers from Bihar and West Bengal refer to as a *Dili-wala* or a *Dili rehene-wala*, roughly meaning “person from Delhi.” He was fluent in the Hindi-Urdu-Punjabi patois commonly spoken on the street in Delhi. As part of an independent, in-depth journalism project he pedaled a cycle rickshaw for two months, working alongside and socializing with a group of cycle rickshaw pullers in North Delhi. Translating my question for Niza, he asked, “When a cycle rickshaw puller says work is down, does it mean that only for him work is down, or for all rickshaw pullers it is down?” Niza answered, “It is for all rickshaw pullers, we mean that when work is down it is down for all cycle rickshaw pullers.” He explained that on occasion men use the discourse to faithfully index a period when, for one reason or another, the industry really is in a slump. He said that a few men would use it to justify delinquency in paying rent for their rickshaws. He speculated that it may also help mitigate jealousy, or the “evil eye” between workmates by insisting that the men share a condition in which it is unlikely that anyone could be earning significantly more than anyone else.¹³ Furthermore, it may help deter robbery and unwanted requests for loans, since someone who is perceived to have lackluster earnings makes an unattractive target.¹⁴ As the multiple functions of the discourse

¹³ Cycle rickshaw men do not pool their earnings, so jealousy is possible. On the evil eye among migrant workers see Good (1982, 27).

¹⁴ It is true that cycle rickshaw pullers seldom celebrate when business is brisk. Here and there they will mention it to a close friend when they have just earned a high fare or are having a good day pay-wise. More commonly, they will exchange stories about a random or regular customer that they used to have, months or years ago, who paid well or otherwise lent exceptional support. Niza’s statement reminded me of a mistake that I had made when I had first started pulling a rickshaw. One night I pedaled a Portuguese man to the railway station. When we reached the station, he got down and handed me 500 rupees (about 25 times more than the going rate) saying, “Most of your customers won’t give this much.” When I returned to *Taakat Chawk* there were five cycle rickshaw pullers waiting there, all of whom I knew well. I was very excited about the big fare I had just earned (or would it be more accurate to speak of the big fare that my white skin and foreign-ness had just earned for me?), so I told them what had happened. They all seemed happy for me, but the trouble started in the following days and took a couple weeks to dissipate. Despite the fact that I did not actually tend to make any more money pulling a rickshaw than other cycle rickshaw pullers and that my pulling a rickshaw had an overall effect of decreasing requests from rickshaw men for material assistance (see my discussion of participant observation in the previous chapter), in the days after announcing that I had received a big tip from the Portuguese man my workmates would not believe me when I told

emerged, it became clear that some of its utility surely lay in its versatility. However, Niza said that most of the time it was used to achieve something else; he, like other trusted interlocutors, emphasized one function of the discourse above all others:

If their family demands that they quickly send money home and they don't have money to send, they will say that work is *mandaa*. But if he says the work is going well and I'm earning that much, there is a probability that the pressures from the home would increase, and they would say send 'us a bit more.' So, unless he gives this impression that work is *mandaa*, that work is not good...when he says, 'work is *mandaa*,' the people at home would say, 'Now that he is not earning much, how can we ask for more?' But if he gives the impression that he is earning more, then he would have to send more money back home.

Jain asked, "Do you also sometimes tell this type of lie?" Niza puffed his cigarette, "Yeah, sometimes."

In the village, disputes, criticism, gossip, and jokes about workers' diligence and honesty in their economic activities commonly occurred, particularly across lines of caste, class, and gender. These wider conversations and conflicts included the thread of the *mandaa* discourse which was regularly invoked by rickshaw men when speaking with their families and fellow villagers and, depending on the circumstances, could spark contentious debate, eye-rolling, or condolences. I broached the subject during one of my visits to the home of a rickshaw man named

them that I had not earned much money. They were under the impression that *gore log* (white people) earned 500 rupees per trip when pulling a rickshaw, and it was hard to live down. My workmates increased their requests that I buy rounds of Pepsi or Coke, and some of them nagged me for small loans. I wrote in Chapter One that my higher economic status vis-a-vis my informants should always be considered relevant to this ethnography. Rather than pretend that my breach of etiquette by announcing high earnings happened on a level playing field, as if my experience and treatment from other cycle rickshaw pullers could serve in this case as a stand-in for that of the average cycle rickshaw puller, I offer the anecdote to relate nothing more than some relatively light consequences that I faced for not respecting that work should always be *mandaa*.

Aandhit. Aandhit had a reputation for losing his cool and arguing, for dishonesty and rashness, and I think he was dogged by depression. When his emotions boiled over, he complained loudly, incessantly, in the most gravelly voice I have ever heard. His passionate personality struck me as a kind of caring and I enjoyed spending time with him even though he had a habit of leaning in as if to whisper, only to loudly raise his raspy voice right in my ear. I remember one night in his village when Aandhit was uncharacteristically relaxed. I talked with him and his wife, Aasmina, in their home while a few small goats clunked around beneath the wooden bed upon which we sat. Aasmina was in her late 30s and a lifetime of performing (unpaid) domestic and agricultural labor showed in her lean, muscular frame around which she draped a colorful new *saari* (local women's dress) recently purchased with money that Aandhit had brought home. I asked for her theory about why rickshaw men always say, "work is *mandaa*," and she replied immediately, "It's because they don't send money. They don't give [their families] soap, food! They don't give their wives new dresses! They spend too much time in Delhi and don't send money, so they say, 'work is *mandaa*.'" She spoke with conviction and in a friendly tone. Aandhit smiled sheepishly and made an almost imperceptible nod to affirm what she had said. Our discussion brought out rickshaw men's wives' familiarity with, and cynicism towards, the discourse, and it supported what Niza and others had told me about how it was strategically mobilized to keep expectations for remittances low.

Aside from the occasional workmate to whom they owed money, rickshaw men rarely had to hide their worktime inactivity from anyone in Delhi. Establishing the *mandaa* discourse in Delhi, though, reduced the risk that any alternative narrative about their work would reach their

wives, dependents, relatives, creditors, and neighbors in the village.¹⁵ Information about the job was further controlled by the physical separation of the work site from the village so that villagers did not have the facts to invalidate the story. The breadwinner ideal brought the men to Delhi, and to keep from disgracing the mission they needed an acceptable explanation for any discrepancies between the ideal and their actual activities and earnings. Indian men who behave subversively often cloak their deviance in language that upholds dominant frameworks (George 2006, 38). The *mandaa* discourse as cover story was effective not only because there was always a possibility that it accurately indexed reality, but also because it did not contradict the dominant breadwinner morality. Of course, from time to time, a rickshaw man would, for whatever reason, contradict his workmates, and incredulous wives like Aasmina would challenge their husbands' hard luck stories. The discourse did not need to work perfectly to be useful, nor does it need to be understood as a conspiracy. Rickshaw men were dogged by pressure to earn and send home increasingly large sums of money, and the *mandaa* discourse offered a tenable, if not incontestable, excuse that was available to all of them. It provided justification, if dubious justification, for behaviors not geared towards maximizing profits, but that involved avoiding work—e.g., napping during peak hours, indifference towards attracting customers, and prioritizing play or chatting with friends over work.

¹⁵ Rickshaw men usually worked alongside other men from their village, and most men had cell phones, so news and gossip traveled to the village quickly.

2.4 The Body Dries Out

Obviously, laziness is afoot, but since it is usually considered immoral the challenge becomes representing it in a way that does not further demonize poor subaltern men who are already despised and treated harshly by many people. Evaluating rickshaw men's laziness by the yardstick of their labor, as a worthless flip side of productive activity, subsumes their humanity under their profession. Laziness should instead be recovered as a value-neutral label for inactivity or non-compliance in the face of direct or indirect demands for productivity. Laziness, thusly understood, runs the gamut from necessary and life-affirming to destructive and evil depending on its context, but only in a moral universe that privileges production is it a priori considered immoral. I continue to use terms like laziness and slacking because they should not be conceded to the bourgeois project, but I also find the phrase "empty labor" as "everything you do at work that is not your work" (Paulsen 2014, 5) useful for describing the time that rickshaw men appropriate under the pretext that work is *mandaa*, so I use it too.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, rickshaw men did not usually see their idleness in a negative light. Occasionally they referred to another rickshaw man as *kaamchor* (work-shy) or *aalsi* (lazy), and such jabs, usually uttered jokingly, were loaded with productivist ideology. Typically, though, they used the *mandaa* discourse to talk about their own empty labor, and Akyaar was no exception. Akyaar was Aandhit's older brother, and he also pulled a rickshaw from *Taakat Chawk*. He was in his late 40s, but the jet-black dye that he applied to his neatly combed hair made him look younger. Unlike his brother, Akyaar was respected and well-liked among his workmates and village-folk for being even-keeled and avoiding gossip. One day, after telling me that, "work is *mandaa*," I began pestering him to invite potential customers to sit in his rickshaw. He smiled as he let them pass. When I reminded him that he had recently told me that he prefers it when business

is brisk, he informed me that he needed to rest because, “Rickshaw pedaling dries you out, makes you go weak” (*tum rikshaa chalaane se sukh jaate ho, kamzoor jaate ho*). Scratch the surface of the discourse about work being *mandaa*, and the most popular explanation given to account for empty labor is that doing the work will dry out the body. Akyaar continued,

Rickshaw men are their own bosses (*rikshaa waale apne maalik hai*). From cycle rickshaw plying you can count your money every day. Yes. It is this reason – the reason of earning. People are greedy, they will say, ‘If I stop working for half an hour, what will happen to my earnings? Where will 100 rupees come from? Where will 200 rupees come from?’ Greed (*laalach*)! [Rickshaw men say,] ‘Now I’m going to get a passenger, now I’m going to get a passenger,’ and they give up eating. From not eating like this their health gets bad. From greed their health gets bad. [Mimicking a customer] ‘Brother let’s go!’ ‘Yes sir, yes sir! Sit down!’ Where did his break go?

Akyaar’s dialogue animated a hypothetical rickshaw man’s adherence to the breadwinner’s injunction to work. The injunction was followed, not coincidentally, with the same fervor (only in the opposite direction) with which proponents of productivism heap aspersions on incidents of laziness. Akyaar clearly saw a conflict between staying healthy and meeting the breadwinner ideal by pedaling a rickshaw.¹⁶ And in a Delhi fieldsite located very close to my own, a cycle rickshaw man confided to a researcher that he was afraid about the toll that his labor had taken on his body even while he performed his labor vigorously to prove his ability as an earner (Chokrabarty 2013, 37). Although many things can contribute to the actual or perceived degradation of their health,

¹⁶ The men told me this conflict was unique to their profession because, aside from the difficulty in self-regulating breaks, in their minds their labor required more physical exertion, resulting in more bodily deterioration, than other types of labor. Their favorite example was how construction workers carry only twenty kilograms of bricks on their heads at a time, whereas rickshaw men haul single loads of passengers and luggage weighing over two hundred kilograms.

this conflict was salient in the minds of rickshaw men, and it provides a window into their labor (non)performance.

In the West, laboring bodies were reinterpreted in the nineteenth century by applying to them newly discovered laws of energy, time, and matter. “The image of labor was radically transformed. It became *labor power*, a concept emphasizing the expenditure and deployment of energy as opposed to human will, moral purpose, or even technical skill” (Rabinbach 1990, 4, emphasis in the original). As the meaning and merit of labor were reduced to the energy and output of the individual worker, the depletion and absence of the worker’s energy arose as labor power’s evil twin, fatigue (Rabinbach 1990). Foucault (1978) puts it this way: “At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited, how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits, except in those-reduced to a minimum-that enabled it to reproduce itself?” (6). Labor could only rev or sputter, thus marking the emergence of productivism’s moral poles. The human-motor was the central organizing metaphor for the rise of productivism (Rabinbach 1990), and it was echoed by the imagery that Akyaar used as he expounded on the bodily consequences of unmitigated productivity:

Rickshaw men have no energy in their bodies because they keep pedaling the rickshaw. In their bodies there is blood, and their blood runs by this machine [in English] that’s in them. Like we make juice by squeezing, this machine squeezes energy from the blood. The blood is squeezed by this machine inside us. So, from pedaling the rickshaw, energy comes out. From our blood energy is made. When we drive this rickshaw, it burns our blood. So, if blood is not left in our body, how can we make energy? That is why men become dried out.

Other poor male migrant workers in Delhi, hailing from Jharkand and Bihar, have likened the performance of their labor to a machine, the running of which bleeds, sucks, or squeezes their bodies dry, and they have remarked that workers who can control their work’s intensity and pace

can avoid being “fucked” by their jobs (Ramaswami 2012, 103). Such ideas surfaced among rickshaw men, one of whom grumbled, “[Passengers] say, ‘Go quickly.’ I go quickly, then they say, ‘Run faster,’ as if I’m a motor [in English]. But this is a blood-run rickshaw (*khun ka chalta gaari*).” In addition to interviewees’ statements documenting the embodied effects of productivism that result from their attempts to be proper breadwinners, I heard rickshaw men complain to their friends about how their work was drying out their bodies.

A dried out body is believed by many West Bengalis to characterize old age, and the body is believed to break down as it dries out (Lamb 2000). But being dried out does not mean dehydrated or merely decrepit. In her study of aging, Lamb (2000) found that a body’s figurative desiccation involved social, emotional, and gendered components (23). Furthermore, people who are elderly, or who are mourning the dead, can induce themselves to dry out by altering their dress, diet, physical location, or level of participation in certain domestic chores, pilgrimages, and other activities (Ibid. 136-139). One activity that unquestionably caused drying out, according to the rickshaw men, was over-participation in their labor process. So far as West Bengali rickshaw men and elderly West Bengalis are separate groups of people, I expect that drying out will have different meanings for them. It appears though, that when rickshaw men applied the metaphor to their own laboring situations it retained some assumptions that it carries in broader West Bengali contexts like, for example, that dried out bodies are associated with participation in very particular activities. Shortly I will discuss how their use of the metaphor also shares with wider North Indian populations a belief that gender and sexual fitness change when bodies dry out.

The body types of rickshaw men varied, and they commented on one another’s weight, strength, size, height, age, color, ailments, irregularities, and disabilities. Being physically strong was prized, and some of the men connected it with eating plenty of high-quality foods. Big bellies

were sometimes flaunted, but also mocked, which supports findings that manual workers from rural India do not necessarily cling to ideal body types (Waite 2005, 418). Yet one need not squint too hard to see that while India's middle class is preoccupied with gyms and weight loss, the real danger for labor-class men in Delhi runs in the opposite direction; "One sees thin, angular, and gaunt bodies, visible rib cages and vertebrae, and indented, punched-in stomachs, along with muscles in the arms, shoulders, and thighs—a strange juxtaposition of emaciation and strength, characteristic of proletarian bodies" (Ramaswami 2012, 32), and at extremes of almost non-stop labor exertion, "bodily losses" occur so that men appear "as quasi-corpses, zombies, and ghosts" (ibid, 41). The health of many rickshaw men did, for whatever reasons, deteriorate badly so that their bodies appeared to waste away, and all rickshaw men bore daily witness to this process in their own bodies, or the bodies of others, and they referred to it as "drying out." They also described less-visible markers of drying out:

After pedaling the rickshaw everyone feels tired, everyone is out of breath. It happens to me, too. It's a problem... Yes, [the rickshaw man] will become tired. He will become weak. Inside there will be no life. From pedaling a rickshaw people become dried out. It's said that you get strong but no, you get weak. Slowly, slowly, you are broken down. Pain in your knees, in your shoulders, your back, from pedaling [a cycle rickshaw].

Indian men's representations of their bodies do not always match their corporeal states, and sometimes these mismatches produce a "hybridization of the real" when they represent their bodies in their past or expected future states (Baas 2018, 417). An odd "hybridization" of this sort was generated between the corporeal state of rickshaw men who looked fat enough at the time, and those same men's premonitions of their impending state of depletion. Not infrequently in Delhi, I watched rickshaw men rub their stomachs or their arms, or pinch their fat, trying to estimate how much their bodies had dried out. One of them told me, "It takes a lot of hard work,

and it takes a lot of energy. A person who pedals a rickshaw will lose a lot of weight. When we come from the village we are fat, but we lose weight and when we go home our wives ask, ‘How did you get so thin?’” Months later, I hung out with Akyaar in the village as he loitered at the intersection of a couple footpaths, dressed as he was most comfortable with a single piece of clothing called a *lungi* wrapped around his waist. He chatted with his neighbor who commented, “Since you’ve gone to Delhi you’ve gotten very dried out.” Akyaar said, “No, I’m feeling good.” Then, clutching and squeezing his paunch, he asked me, “Hey, how am I looking? How did you say I look?” “You’re looking fat. You’ve gotten very fat,” I teased. The neighbor said, “Maybe fat, okay, but from before he went to Delhi he’s looking very dried out.” Akyaar contemplated this, staring at his midsection and rubbing his naked belly.

My interlocutors’ descriptions of their labor performance conjure pictures of an internal machine that powers them, running rough from deprivation of fuel and rest. These descriptions place the men’s experiences of the labor activity that they carry out under the breadwinner mandate squarely within the paradigm of productivism. However, accounting for bodily experience of labor whether fully or partially in terms of a human-motor model need not mean that one’s view is restricted to the bourgeois scale of values. For rickshaw men’s discussion of their bodily experience of work in terms of labor power appears to be the set-up, the laying of one side of a moral backdrop that stretches not from noble production to unjust laziness, but from a production imperative to other, sexual imperatives.

2.5 Sexual Fitness

The worker-as-machine metaphor can be challenged in gender-specific ways when the ‘machine’ starts to ‘malfunction’ (Martin 1987). Rickshaw men believed that their bodies dried out from performing their productive labor, and this put their productive labor in conflict with their manhood because drying out was thought to entail a loss of sexual fitness. Some rickshaw men were tight-lipped about their sexual virility, or lack thereof, but others—older ones in particular—were candid and comfortable discussing it. Akyaar reasoned,

Why does a man get hard (*khanda*)? Because he’s got energy in his body, right? When he has sex, his load comes out (*maal nikal kiya*) like in the video [earlier we had watched a pornographic video on his phone showing someone ejaculating], then in our body nothing at all is left and I’ll fall down. Look, right now in my body there is energy. Some girl comes and says, ‘Will you do it?’ and I say, ‘Yes, let’s do it.’ I do it one time. One time is finished. Then I do it again. But if there’s no energy, how can I do it again? If there’s no energy I will fall down.

By “fall down” he meant that he will not achieve an erection. As he spoke, he illustrated by pointing and relaxing his finger to imitate a penis. Notably, factory workers in Delhi are known to compare their level of energy at work with the erectness or flaccidity of a phallus (Ramaswami 2006, 211-212). In North India, impotence can accompany a type of men’s somatic drying out that derives from poor production and retention of semen, and in this type of drying out alterations in the materiality of men’s bodies are linked with transformations to their moral status as men (Alter 2011). A loss of libido and an inability to have sex also result from the process of drying out that is considered by West Bengalis to accompany old age (Lamb 2000, 163). Older West Bengalis who lose their sexual vitality as their bodies “dry out” consequently undergo significant shifts in their gender identities which can involve changes in their levels of participation in gendered

spheres of activity (Lamb 2000, 161-167). Consistent with these findings that somatic drying out is synonymous for many Indians with a loss of sexual fitness and reconfigured gender, Akyaar tied the bodily deterioration from pedaling a rickshaw and its attendant sexual dysfunction to a loss of masculine status explaining,

From pedaling a rickshaw, men [...] can't get hard, then your wife will tell you to get away from her. If you can't get hard, your wife will get angry and push you away. She'll say, 'Why can't you get hard?' For this reason their manhood (*mardaangi*) decreases.

Indian men are known to locate their honor in their bodies (George 2006), and they sometimes partake in bodily pleasure as a “declaration of autonomy” from oppressive economic and caste situations (Kantor 2016, 147). Rickshaw men saw their embodied sexual fitness as a point of masculine pride that was threatened when their bodies dried out. While inactivity plainly led to problems meeting the breadwinner expectation, working vigorously resulted in impotence. Rickshaw men were forced to decide whether, and how much, empty labor to carve out against worktime to satisfy the alternate masculine ethic of sexual fitness. Insofar as ideal breadwinning can be equated with the sheer productivism of a human motor, and to the extent that a zero-sum conflict obtained in which rickshaw men withdrew from work to protect their sexual fitness, they objectively practiced anti-productivism.

A number of my interlocutors corroborated Akyaar's statements. Niza said,

Earlier my manhood (*mardaangi*) was okay, it was no problem, but slowly after more days working, it became less. Like my age is forty-nine, earlier there was manhood, my strength wasn't depleted. But in the sexual line [in English] my manhood became weak. Like earlier I could do it three times, now only one time. This happened from pedaling a rickshaw. It's not only a problem for me, it's for all rickshaw men. Slowly, slowly (*dire-dire*) it began.

The men saw their work as “slowly, slowly” depleting their capacity to meet sexual obligations in the long-run and into the foreseeable future. This suggests that it was not an equation of how to prudently balance one’s work with rest today, this week, or even this migration cycle. Nor did it seem that a loss of sexual fitness was easily reversible. The game seemed to lie more in minimizing work whenever possible for the sake of remaining a proper sexually fit man in the future.

Some men lit up when the topic of discussion turned to sex, and some steered conversations towards it. I have avoided attempting to define what sex meant to rickshaw men, and here I only wish to echo a description offered by Ramaswami (2012) in his fine-grained ethnographic study of a group of poor male migrant laborers in Delhi. He considers bonding between the laborers and their wives that cannot be reduced to an economic rationale and characterizes it as “actual life” (Ramaswami 2012, 57). Rickshaw men spent months away from their wives and were eager to return to “actual life” in the village for, among many other things, sex.¹⁷ I asked Niza, “Does [your wife] understand that this sexual line problem is from pedaling a rickshaw?” He replied,

Yes, but she is very good. She is very kind. Her heart is very good. She also understands that I have become an old man. I used to have sex for thirty-five minutes. Now, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. After pedaling a rickshaw your sex decreases (*sex kam ho jaate*). From pedaling a rickshaw your body gets dry, your manhood appears less (*mardaangi kam dikhata hai*). When you go back to the village, you won’t be able to have as much sex. This is why however much rest you need at work, you should take it.

¹⁷ Some of the men had sex in Delhi, but they still participated in the discourses and behaviors described in this chapter. Those who cheated on their wives were not exempt from their sexual and financial obligations to their wives. Therefore, an analysis of the antagonism between those men’s productive and sexual powers is still only effective to the degree to which it maps an escape route from the cul-de-sac of reproductive-versus-productive labor.

2.6 Conclusion

I do not intend to downplay the reality of husband-wife as an (unequal) economic unit, or the fact that when a rickshaw man returned home his proper sexual performance helped to renew his commitment to the monogamous, economic dyad. Nor do I wish to pretend that sex cannot be restorative or fulfill a basic human need that must take place, for most people, outside of work. Sex and sexual fitness are clearly enmeshed in the reproduction of labor, but they are not coterminous with it. My fieldwork shows that sexual fitness is not only interdependent with economic production but, in rickshaw men's minds, greatly jeopardized by it. Framing my ethnographic data as merely an imbalance experienced between interdependent spheres of paid and reproductive labor would serve to legitimize the human motor-model and its attenuated view of labor activity as labor power. To avoid entanglement in the dialectic of productive-versus-reproductive labor, I have emphasized the "antagonism" between the men's expenditure of labor power and their sexual fitness. Some men handled this conflict by appropriating empty labor and, crucially, reported that its main purpose lay in achieving a masculine project tuned more to maintaining their erections than to restoring their labor power. When the meaning of empty labor has more to do with the manliness of being sexually fit than it does with the reproduction of labor power, then it is possible to recognize a, "struggle for separation" (Weeks 2011, 95) from the work/rest binary, and it can be said that rickshaw men are prefiguring an anti-productivist society one break at a time.

Rickshaw men's slacking poses an important challenge to the productivist bias in academic literature on contemporary Indian workers. It reveals that anti-productivism can emerge when the (real or imagined) physiological effects of labor performance undermine the worker's ability to maintain bodily gender ideals. As the men struggled to uphold their gender normativity on the one

hand, it was transgressed on the other hand when the male breadwinner role was quietly shirked. It makes some sense to think of rickshaw men's dilemma in terms of competing strands of masculinity since their manhood was at stake at every turn and becoming a proper man in one direction meant failing in the other obligation. However, calling it competing masculinities does not bring the labor issue to the fore. Furthermore, it risks portraying the men as experiencing confusion or having fragmented subjectivities. Despite rickshaw men's embodied conflict, it would be unfair to say that their experiences were incoherent; they well understood the importance of achieving both projects. They evinced pragmatic outlooks by reminding me of their poverty and that other types of work had their own disadvantages, and by asking rhetorically, "What can I do?" I did not discover whether men or women from the rickshaw men's villages who did other types of jobs experienced similar tensions between their labor and their gendered lives, but it deserves further study. Certainly, this study suggests that inactivity at work that might typically be labeled as rest and recovery or resistance to exploitation should be explored as a possible challenge to productivism. Wherever such a challenge exists, especially among relatively powerless groups, subterfuge along the lines of the *mandaa* discourse may accompany it. Workers' exact motives for problematizing their relationship with their labor activity were dependent in the foregoing case study on local ideas about how the male body dries out from a specific breadwinning activity and how men's bodies should perform sexually. This demonstrates that the embodiment of culturally particular and discordant gender ideals can have a profound effect on workers' orientation towards, and level of engagement with, their work.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that while breadwinning was challenged, it was not overturned. Rickshaw men remained accountable to the breadwinner role, and their discursive strategies bowed to productivism. They had, after all, come to Delhi for work, and the expectation

to work as hard as possible and earn to the best of their abilities heavily influenced most aspects of their lives. Poor sexual performance could ruin a marriage, but failure to send remittances could do the same. Examining these men's empty labor and their thinking behind it provides an opportunity to see them outside of a two-dimensional productivist framework. This experiment should not cloud the fact that, even though rickshaw men did not normally account for their empty labor in terms of replenishing their labor power, it was nevertheless objectively helpful to that end. It should also be noted that anti-productivist behaviors do not guarantee a radical outcome besides the fact that they are anti-productivist. To all appearances, cycle rickshaw pullers were minimizing work in order to uphold hetero-normative and patriarchal gender relations with their wives.

Rickshaw men's anti-productivism was enacted quietly. Presented as fatigue in Delhi and packaged as misfortune for their families in the village, the pockets of stolen time and their corollary sexual wellness were flickers of an anti-productivist society, of possibility. The tiny rumblings of anti-productivism in North India were not understood as radical politics by rickshaw men, still the anti-productivism lens helps further elucidate the relationship between homo economicus and our complex gendered selves. It is an approach that is worth the effort wherever productivism is encountered, to distinguish that which is human from the human-motor.

3.0 Intimacy and Industry

Aandhit sat in the back of his rickshaw as I pedaled us along the backstreet lined with sleeping rickshaw pullers, then along a busier road where buses and cars squeezed us towards the shoulder. We slowly merged onto a traffic circle and another rickshaw puller who pedaled alongside us noticed that I did not look like an average rickshaw puller, so he called out in surprise. We exchanged greetings as we circumnavigated the busy roundabout, and then lost track of one another amid the noisy motorcycles and scooters that darted around our tricycles. Aandhit and I exited the circle and rolled up to the gate of a park. We pulled his rickshaw onto the curb and then walked into the park together where I had planned to conduct an interview. As we entered, we passed a teenage boy coming out who was wearing shabby clothes and smoking a joint. The boy asked Aandhit who I was, and Aandhit just said I was a friend. We went and sat on a nearby bench, and I tried to begin the interview, but Aandhit's phone rang, and he began talking with his wife, Aasmina. A few minutes passed and we noticed that the teenage boy was climbing into Aandhit's rickshaw. Aandhit called for him to stop, but the boy sat down in the rickshaw anyway. Aandhit had some personal belongings stowed beneath the seat and in the basket of the rickshaw that he could not risk losing. He quickly walked back and kicked the kid out of the rickshaw. I speculated that the boy might be a thief, and Aandhit grumbled in a very serious tone, "Yes, he's a thief."

We stood by the gate of the park, and Aandhit complained about people in Delhi. He gestured towards a poor woman across the street who was cloaked in a dusty *saari* and surrounded by a few small children and told me that mothers like that send their kids to steal and beg for money which they then give to their alcoholic husbands who drink it away. He was going on about the corrupt and immoral lives of people who live in Delhi, and I got the feeling that he was talking

past me, lecturing someone other than me. Suddenly he ran into the street in front of an oncoming police jeep. The jeep stopped short and Aandhit picked up a toddler who had wandered into the road and who the police were about to run over. A policeman got out of the jeep and walked up to Aandhit who stood there holding the child. I have seen how police regularly use arbitrary violence towards rickshaw pullers, so I was relieved and a little surprised that the policeman did not shout or hit Aandhit. He must have recognized that Aandhit had just saved the child, and after a few casual words he got back in the jeep and drove on. Aandhit returned the little girl to her mother, then told me that from spending so much time in the neighborhood he knows the child and sometimes plays with her. The child had recognized him and had run towards him without looking out for traffic. Aandhit had seen this happen and saved her.

We gave up trying to do an interview, and Aandhit pedaled me back to *Taakat Chawk*. On the way he narrated what had just happened. I thought he was recounting for my sake how he had scooped the girl out of traffic, but then I heard a woman's voice and realized that he was still on the line with Aasmina. The phone was resting in his breast pocket and his wife was on speaker phone. This was the first time that I noticed the practice that is common enough among cycle rickshaw pullers of 'hanging out' on speaker phone with their wives and families during their workday.

At *Taakat Chawk*, Aandhit made himself comfortable in the back of his rickshaw and chatted with his wife, holding her on the phone for a very long time, asking if she had eaten, what she had eaten, and then asking about all their relatives one by one. My attention wandered to Manoj who was waiting for customers nearby. Manoj was the younger brother of Panchim, and he was thinner than Panchim, with large gentle eyes the whites of which steadily yellowed over the time that I knew him. Although I never learned of an official diagnosis, he became emaciated and very

sick over three years, and I surmised that he was dying. He was perched on the narrow bar between the seat and the handlebars of his rickshaw, and his big eyes were glued to a young woman across the street who appeared to belong to the middle-class, and who was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and carrying shopping bags as she made her way from the market. She hailed a passing cycle rickshaw and the rickshaw man accepted her without negotiating a fare (he would end up being paid whatever she wanted to pay him). The young woman's driver wiped the seat for her and obediently helped her climb aboard with all her packages. As he began to pedal the woman flicked him on the back and pointed to indicate that she wanted him to make a left, which he did. They faded down the street and Manoj started eyeballing a couple of women who looked like college students.

3.1 Introduction

Like Aandhit, most rickshaw men were in putatively monogamous marriages with women, and they maintained their relationships with their wives even while working in Delhi. Their relationships with their wives were complicated — the more so because of migration — and were very important for their economic survival as well as for their emotional and sexual fulfillment. However, like Manoj, many rickshaw men paid a lot of attention to women on the street in Delhi, and specifically toward women who did not look like their wives. The men enjoyed joking about, and objectifying, women who appeared to be of the upper or middle-classes, and who exhibited non-traditional fashion styles. They resented, and voiced critiques of, these cosmopolitan, Westernized women, who they referred to as “Delhi girls,” and at the same time they fantasized about and stated sexual desire for them. The power relations inherent in the interaction between

rickshaw pullers and Delhi girls ensured that my interlocutors' sexual fantasies about Delhi girls remained unfulfilled. Although the men claimed that they did not migrate seeking sexual adventure, some of them did end up buying sex while they were in Delhi. Interestingly, they hired sex workers who were ethnically and culturally similar to themselves and seemed to cultivate more than physical connections with them.

In these three types of interactions along the migration circuit—that is, in interactions with sex workers, Delhi girls, and their wives—rickshaw men's (hetero)sexuality figured prominently, and it shaped their experiences of their labor and their migration. The men's relationships with their wives exerted a gravitational pull that often determined the 'when' and 'why' of their return migrations; they returned out of jealousy and fear of infidelity, loneliness and longing, and to satisfy requests for help around the house.¹⁸ While in Delhi, many rickshaw men spoke about the virtues of, and their commitments to, monogamous marriage. However, many men also fantasized about women who they saw on the street, and they did so despite their sharp criticisms of them. It was one thing to gawk from a distance, but they needed to adopt more deferential postures when they provided rickshaw service to Delhi girls. In close quarters, the men's masculine self-presentations were filtered through the unequal social power relations at play so that they would, to varying degrees, efface those aspects of their masculinity that their richer, higher-caste female customers might find threatening. Rickshaw men ended up providing service silently, or remaining soft-spoken, and they refrained from chatting, joking, or arguing with their female customers. Fictitious kin terms were adopted between rickshaw men and their customers, and this probably helped discourage flirtation from creeping into their interaction. On one occasion, before he was

¹⁸ There were additional reasons to return to the village such as religious holidays, harvest seasons, weddings, illnesses, settling disputes, spending time with relatives and friends, and relaxing and recovering from work in Delhi.

allowed to transport his solo female passengers, I heard the woman's male friends warn the rickshaw man about the consequences of treating his female rider with disrespect, and they told him that they would hunt him down if she was dissatisfied with his behavior.¹⁹ All this foreclosed the possibility of sex or flirtation with Delhi girls, but some rickshaw men paid for sex in Delhi. Rather than fulfilling fantasies completely detached from their wives and rural life, the men bought sex from women who were from regions of South Asia that were close to their villages and who were culturally similar to the women in their villages, and they enjoyed bonding with the sex workers because it offered a temporary emotional return to the village. The interactions between rickshaw men and sex workers provided an imitation of, or substitute for, another type of relationship that was temporarily out of reach. At the same time, their interactions with sex workers carried unique meaning, and some of the men reported that the sex they purchased allowed them to endure and extend their stays in Delhi. These findings are elaborated in the following sections and supply further evidence suggesting that without appreciating rickshaw pullers as masculine actors, our understanding of them as migrant workers can only be superficial.

Rickshaw men performed, sustained, and/or downplayed their masculine heterosexuality through their interactions with women along their migratory paths, and they did so mainly under intimate conditions that compounded or ebbed as the relationships evolved. The interactions were subject to the consequences of unfolding within the intimate conditions that they created. Intimacy implies closeness and this can include being privy to information about someone, emotional connections, and/or physical proximity and familiarity with someone's body (Jamieson 1998, 1-10). It is worth looking at how intimacy affects rickshaw men's work and migration because

¹⁹ Although this style of providing service through self-effacement of their masculinity was most consistently noticeable when the rickshaw men were interacting with Delhi girls, some of it also appeared in interactions with other types of customers.

studies of migrant men tend to privilege the economic factors behind their migration decisions (Ahmad 2009). I deploy the concept of intimacy as a framework for the following discussion in which it “serves as a placeholder for the quality of inter-subjective closeness in relationships as well as the process of generating such mutual familiarity” (Mody 2019, 259), although my use of the concept carries less of an emphasis on mutuality. I agree that “intimacy connotes both ‘something’ and ‘nothing’—being simultaneously a quality of closeness and the ‘process’ for generating closeness that is in the making” (Mody 2019, 258). Intimacy is a condition and a process that, in the cases I examine, enables the fashioning, gratification, or suppression of male heterosexuality. In that sense, “intimacy is a productive space that can be shaped to suit the purposes at hand” (Mody 2019, 261). While existing research suggests that migrant Indian men enact different forms of intimacy in different situations and places, there is a lack of studies that supply in-depth ethnographic evidence for it; most studies concern themselves with ethnographic investigations of a single site or pole on the migration circuit. The following sections present three types of intimate interactions at different points on rickshaw men’s migration circuit, stressing the men’s subjective experiences and the power/knowledge relations within which each was enmeshed. As “the anthropological task remains one of synthesizing the emotional and economic values and constraints of these [intimate] exchanges as we find them” (Mody 2019, 260), my research provides a description of the intimacy produced by rickshaw pullers as it was embroiled in their laboring and class situations. I argue that the industry of rickshaw pulling itself therefore took its shape in no minor way through the intimate interactions carried on by its workers at different positions in their migratory circuits.

3.2 Background

There is an inextricable connection between intimate relationships and economy (Zelizer 2005), and the commodification of intimacy has been described in specific case studies of late capitalism (e.g., Bernstein 2007). In a study of women who migrate from Indonesia and the Philippines to Hong Kong as domestic workers, Constable (2016) described the way that the industry of domestic work intersects with the industries of sex work and child adoption. Recognizing that all three industries rely on intimate labor, she argues that the industries feed into one another, and that the commodification of intimacy can take transnational and multi-industry forms. Building off this exploration of intersecting and synergistic intimacies, my project also looks at three cases of intimacy. I do not, however, conceptualize them as industries, but as interactions and relationships. I look at how the different intimate interactions and relationships of workers from the single industry of cycle rickshaw pulling provided the workers with incentives or imperatives to perform their labor and migration in the ways that they did, thus contributing to scholarly understandings of how multiple intimacies can converge to support and shape a particular industry.

Academics who focus on South Asia have also acknowledged that intimacy can be commodified (Ahmad 2009; Mody 2019), and, although they do not engage with intimacy as a concept, a wide range of ethnographic studies tend to the ways that Indian men transgress or reinforce class and caste boundaries in intimate settings (e.g., De Neve 2005; Nisbett 2007; Jeffrey 2010). Chopra (2006) deals more explicitly with the concept of intimacy and how it applies to the gendered lives of Indian workers. Her study of male domestic workers in urban North India is groundbreaking for the way that it challenges scholarly notions of what intimacy means for the performance of gender. She does so by examining the phenomenon of male veiling and describing

how within the private homes of their employers, male laborers feel compelled to downplay the aspects of their masculinity that their female supervisors find threatening. In the next section of this chapter, I use Chopra's ideas about male veiling to make sense of rickshaw men's interactions with their female passengers. Her insight that gendered practice is highly situational and can be influenced by the particularities of an intimate setting is fundamental to my exploration of the different types of intimate interactions in which rickshaw men participate. Rickshaw men exhibit or conceal different parts of their masculinities according to the type of woman with whom they interact, and I describe how each interaction is connected to their experience as laborers in the industry of cycle rickshaw pulling.

Other academics have attempted to describe the relationship between modernity and intimacy, and their discussions supply an important backdrop for this chapter because while the meaning of modernity is notoriously nebulous, it usually implies some of the same qualities that typify a certain section of Delhi and the Delhi girls who the rickshaw men desire and loathe, such as wealth, Western or international styles, and changing gender norms. Modernity is often assumed to be accompanied by increasing social equality, and it has been hypothesized that with the introduction of modernity and its assumed social equality, relationships such as marriage and sexual relationships would increasingly become based on "pure" intimacy which involves love born of voluntary association and the sharing of thoughts and feelings to achieve a deep, mutual understanding (Giddens 1992). This idea has been critically examined, and scholarship has called attention to the incomplete, and imperfect rise of so-called "pure" intimacy within the many types of intimate relationships in the "modern" West (Jamieson 1998). Evidence from South Asia has also been mustered to challenge the idea that modernity begets intimate relationships of a purer variety. A shift towards the Nehruvian modernity of Five Year Plans for development, which offers

secure government employment to narrow section of the industrial working class in central India, is associated with a new and privileged class of workers who were actually less likely to divorce as their hearts pleased, and gender inequality was on the rise (Parry 2001). Rickshaw men did not have secure industrial or government employment fitting the modernist Nehruvian model, but they did have long-term, street-level encounters with Delhi, and these encounters with the modern city made an impression such that they prohibited their wives or daughters from migrating with them because they were afraid that the city's culture would sexually corrupt them. Rickshaw men attempted to uphold conservative gender relations in their village, but they also joined the many poor wage workers and migrant workers in India who use their work sites and migratory situations as opportunities to explore their sexualities and engage in new forms of intimacy (De Neve 2005; Ramaswami 2006; Shah 2006). And while rickshaw men said that they did not come to Delhi seeking sex or romance, the sex and romance that they purchased there did make them feel rejuvenated and able to endure longer labor migration stints. The following sections describe how the rickshaw men squared their commitments to married life with their attraction to, and anxiety about, women in Delhi.

Srivastava's (2007) study of Indian sexuality contains the most nuanced and sustained investigation of the formation of labor-class male migrants' sexuality through their encounters with Indian metropolises. He rejects the notion that tradition and modernity are dichotomized geographically so that rural areas can be equated with tradition while urban areas represent modernity. And he opposes the view that shifts from tradition to modernity would happen uniformly and steadily with traditional options fading away in city life, positing instead that a fluid, messy mix of modern and village elements coexist and (re)emerge in the city, including styles and erotic symbols that appeal to village sexualities alongside globalized, middle-class sexual culture.

Poor men who migrate to the city are said to have agency in constructing their sexuality from this mélange of choices, and in engaging with this glut of choices they enact “surplus consumerism.” The outcome of trying to make sense of a multiplicity of traditional and “modern” options all present in one place at the same time is what he calls “surplus subjectivity.” Men whose sexualities are forged through “surplus subjectivities” will relate to what usually might be thought of as stark and contradictory juxtapositions of erotic symbols and imagery, and Srivastava calls this “undisciplined desire” (Srivastava 2007, 185-187). These concepts are helpful for understanding rickshaw men’s ambivalence towards Delhi girls and the way that they buy sex.

Srivastava’s sensitive chapters on poor migrants to the city are a story of traumatizing awakening that happens upon arrival to perpetual insecurity, and a psychic-emotional state of “permanent ephemerality” characterized by longing for a return to the village and the comfort of traditional culture (Srivastava 2007, 169). This is a consequence of “the wrenching of vast populations from the social security of the kin networks of the village and the small town due to the collapse of the provincial economy” (Srivastava 2007, 170). Srivastava further explains that,

Long established bonds of intimacy and succour have been made desolate, and the attempts to re-establish them in another context is the nature of a haunting of the urban sphere by the ghosts of decimated social structures and their wandering subjects. It is a haunting inasmuch as these bonds re-emerge in the city [...] as the spectres of desperation, and the apparitions of a ‘locality’ that is almost always beyond grasp (Srivastava 2007, 171).

The return to the village is always mentioned as a yearning, as an unfulfilled wish, as a cultural ideal, rather than something that many people actually do. Srivastava’s poetic observations are astute and fitting for many poor rural men who make one-way migrations to the city, but they do not quite work for circular migrants like rickshaw pullers; rickshaw pullers do not exist in the “permanent ephemerality” of having their desire to return to village culture going unsatisfied.

There is a historical trend dating back hundreds of years in Bihar and West Bengal wherein labor migrants have usually returned to their villages whenever possible rather than “modernize” and settle down in the city (De Haan 2002). The following sections recognize that rickshaw men keep with this trend and demonstrate that for whatever “surplus subjectivity” rickshaw men acquire in Delhi, they are also subject to physically returning to their wives which importantly constrains and shapes their actions and how they rationalize them.

3.3 Delhi Girls

For men in cities across India, objectifying and joking about women on the street can be a popular pastime (Abraham 2002, 347; Ramaswami 2006, 225). This is true of many rickshaw men for whom watching, gawking at, joking about, and/or lusting over women who pass on the street is a normal way to spend their downtime on the job, and different men are inspired to comment about different types of women.²⁰ On the whole, rickshaw men commented and joked about a type of woman who exhibited styles (including dress, makeup, tattoos, personal consumer items), behaviors (such as language, smoking, traveling alone), or a body type (including racial

²⁰ Rickshaw men favored joking with one another secretly over blatant eve teasing or catcalling, and there were instances when a rickshaw man would shush his workmates because he feared that the woman who they were joking about would hear them. Although I never saw a woman show any sign that she knew she was being joked about, sometimes the women undoubtedly did hear and understand what the rickshaw men were saying, but, for a variety of possible reasons, chose to ignore them. I met some women who automatically suspected that all rickshaw men were objectifying them, but my best guess is that most of the time rickshaw men’s commentary and joking was carried out with enough discretion that the women either did not notice, or could not be certain of what the rickshaw men were laughing about. Being accused of any type of improper behavior by a middle-class woman was a very dangerous situation for a rickshaw man, so they did their best to keep their comments and jokes inaudible to the women. Staring, however, was not done discretely, and while staring itself can be a form of aggression, the rickshaw men could always say that they were looking for customers. In any event, I never saw a woman on the street complain to, or confront, a rickshaw man for staring or catcalling, and this, I believe, had as much to do with the women’s weaker gender position in the patriarchal society as with any discretion that rickshaw men exercised in their weaker class and caste positions.

characteristics) that can be indicative of health, wealth, Western-ness or foreign-ness, and sexiness. Rickshaw men would most often refer to these women as “Delhi girls,” and if there is something like a unified image that can represent the category it would be a young or middle-aged, middle or upper-class, light-skinned Indian woman wearing non-traditional or Western clothing.

Laxmi rattled past on his rickshaw and slapped me with a high-five that made a cracking sound that echoed off the metro station’s cement recesses. As he queued his vehicle in the line of waiting rickshaws, I watched a heavyset woman with an armful of shopping bags pick her way through traffic. The wiry Bengali man wearing a tight black sleeveless shirt, dull trousers, and flip-flops strode over to me, sweating, looking mischievous, and pointing toward the woman as she struggled to climb aboard someone’s rickshaw. As she was carted away, he jibed, “She’s an elephant!” Akyaar overheard him and pitched in by pointing his nose to the sky, tightening his lips, and rocking his shoulders back and forth in his best impression of an ultra-uppity woman. Moments later, a young girl walked by in a short skirt with a low-cut top and Akyaar commented, “She’s got a couple nice mangoes.” I checked with him, “You’re talking about that girl that just walked by, right?” He and Laxmi laughed, and they seemed a little embarrassed that I had understood that they were talking about the woman’s breasts. “She is probably 15 [years old]!” I said, and Laxmi quipped, “[She] seems like 30 [years old]! I’d do her from behind.” He grunted and thrust his hips to illustrate. With feigned solemnity he proceeded to claim that Delhi girls have “big strong pussies,” and they will grab and hold a man who penetrates them. He continued his joke, asserting that he had once gotten his penis stuck inside a Delhi girl. I asked, “So you’ve had sex with one of these Delhi girls?” He then replied in a sober tone, “No, I’m married.” “So you can’t take Delhi girls if you’re married? I think some other rickshaw pullers...” But he said, “I love [my wife] a lot.”

Akyaar chimed in to set the ethnographic record straight; “You’ve seen my kids, you’ve seen [Laxmi’s] kids, right?” I nodded, recalling meeting the men’s families on a recent visit to their village. “They don’t wear clothes like that [Delhi girl who had just walked past],” he declared. Part of the reason why cycle rickshaw pullers prefer to leave their families in the village is that they do not wish for their wives and daughters to adopt the dress or habits of Delhi girls. Akyaar claimed that no matter how rich a Delhi girl may be, he would not marry his son to her. He continued in a light-hearted tone, “Delhi girls are no good because they wear trashy clothes (*gande kaparde pehente hain*),” and as he said it, he dragged his hands along the contours of his chest and hips to show he meant tight clothing. He said, “Girls in the village wear a scarf that covers their chest. Delhi girls don’t wear it. In the village girls also wear jewelry in their nose and in their ears, but not as much in Delhi.” He respected village women’s adherence to stricter cultural norms of modesty, and he went on to voice disapproval for the way that women in Delhi seemed to move about public spaces freely, without an escort. Other rickshaw men’s descriptions of Delhi girls were more barbed: “Delhi girls’ culture [used the English word, culture] is no good,” “They’re useless,” and “Their pussies are dry.” Rickshaw men expressed contempt for Delhi girls, but they also sexualized them with great bravado. So far as accusations of “dry pussies” were a case of sour grapes, then it was the unequal power relations that thrive in the class and caste divides between rickshaw men and Delhi girls that most consistently kept sexual relationships with Delhi girls out of rickshaw men’s reach. This became clearer to me as I interviewed Manoj, who I introduced in this chapter’s opening vignette.

I asked whether watching Delhi girls was rooted in loneliness, and after Jain, my interpreter, repeated the question in Hindi, Manoj replied, “Of course when I come here and stay here for one year it is very lonely. For an outsider that is a major factor. If a beautiful woman is

going past, you surely say to yourself, ‘Man, she’s amazing! I just wonder how it would be if I were able to have sex with her.’ These fantasies are my way of facing that loneliness.” Kakar (1990) reminds us that, “the origins of fantasy lie in the unavoidable conflict between many of our desires [...] and the environment’s inability or unwillingness to fulfill our desires” (27). We were parked near an abandoned bus station on the outskirts of an unauthorized housing development about one kilometer from the metro station and *Taakat Chawk*. Some crows hopped around on the brick sidewalk in the sunshine, and nearby another rickshaw puller snoozed in the backseat of his rickshaw. Manoj added, “I have many women [in Delhi] with whom I am friends, but my friendship is only limited to joking. I would not go very far with them. I can flirt, but I probably could not find a friend who would go further. I probably have given a hint, but that hint was probably not understood or not returned.” I asked, “What kind of women are these? Where do they come from? Are they outsiders or Delhi girls?” He answered, “They are the type who do domestic help. Some of them come from my area, West Bengal, some come from South India. I think nothing bad about Delhi girls, however my observation is that Delhi girls will get off my rickshaw and hop into another’s the very next moment.” Here Jain assured me that this was meant to be taken figuratively to mean that Delhi girls are promiscuous and go from one intimate relationship to the next easily and often. I asked, “So why do you like these worker girls who come from outside Delhi?” Manoj responded:

They are hotter! Okay, one reason that I get on better with those migrant maids is that I was more free to talk with them and did not worry about what if something iffy or questionable or flirtatious comes out of my mouth. If I say something they will be able to take it. But, if I compare this situation with those women who are from those rich houses, Delhi girls, probably they will not be able to...I mean I would worry if something different comes from my mouth. They might take it wrong and stop riding with me or.... [he trailed off]

Manoj's statements reveal his attraction to Delhi girls ("man, she's amazing!"), and also his attraction to women whose backgrounds are similar to his own ("they are hotter!"). For all his "undisciplined desire" (Srivastava 2007), Manoj "could not find a friend who would go further," and this is consistent with my findings that few rickshaw men actually formed sexual relationships with labor-class women (besides sex workers) in Delhi.²¹²² Manoj was nevertheless able to nurture a level of (non-sexual) intimacy with domestic worker women, but he had less luck with Delhi girls, and his statements that associated Delhi girls with wealth, and that expressed his fear of what Delhi girls would do if they did not like what he said to them, suggest that this had to do with their superior class and caste status. Many working-class migrant women form sexual relationships characterized by power imbalances while they are away from home, and this has been the focus of much scholarly attention (e.g., Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004; Cheng 2012). However, the experiences of labor-class South Asian males on the migration trail are typically characterized by sexual deprivation as a result of their social positions (Ahmad 2009). Drawing on Butler's (1993) ideas about the way that the materiality of the body is implicated in the presentation of sexuality, Ahmad (2009) explains that the male migrant's class position can prevent him from "materializing" as appropriately heterosexual, or even as a sexual being, in the eyes of the locals. The very fact that the migrant appears *only* as a worker in a lowly service job that is not sex work

²¹ There was only one rickshaw man who I knew who had sex with someone other than a sex worker in Delhi, and it was with a woman who he had met in his village prior to coming to Delhi. They would periodically rendezvous in Delhi where she worked as a maid. However, he made it clear that their relationship did not factor into his decisions about when to come to Delhi or when to return to his wife in his village. Another rickshaw man told me that he regularly met with a Delhi girl and referred to her as his girlfriend. "She kept coming here and I carried her in my rickshaw and talked with her. She has an office job somewhere. She comes here to the market and I wait for her while she does her shopping. We ride around and talk." "Do you have sex?" "No, no, just talk." The case looks like it could be an exception to the rule that cycle rickshaw pullers do not form romantic relationships with Delhi girls, but I do not have any more details.

²² The presence of a rickshaw man's workmates probably usually functioned to deny him sexual experiences with women in Delhi, as they intentionally and unintentionally surveilled and policed one another in a manner similar to that which has been documented among other migrant communities (Portes and Stepick 1993; Tapias and Escandell 2011, 90).

reinforces the common view that he is an asexual creature that exists to perform (non-sexual) labor for his customer (Ahmad 2009, 320). Manoj could ogle Delhi girls from a distance, but when they approached him for a ride, he was expected to be unprovocative and asexual.

Part of Manoj's "surplus subjectivity" (Srivastava 2007) was formed by his experience of Delhi girls nickel-and-diming him over the price of a ride, berating him for smoking, criticizing his driving, and making him do extra work like carrying their packages or running from shop to shop to find change for their one-hundred rupee notes. I regularly witnessed rickshaw men in Delhi being verbally abused and stiffed on the fare by middle-class women (as well as by middle-class men). I saw a woman customer fetch her male relative who beat the rickshaw man over a disputed fare. In such situations, police, too, will not hesitate to beat a rickshaw man without evidence or trial. To avoid possible further abuse, interactions with Delhi girls were choreographed to deny any "materialization" of heterosexuality or tones of attraction. The phenomenon of dissembling one's gender and sexuality has been studied using the concept of the veil. It is generally recognized that, in order to protect their modesty (which, for the purposes of my discussion, can be the same as preventing the "materialization" of sexuality and the sexed body), many women in South Asia and elsewhere wear a scarf or piece of thin fabric over their faces or perform spatial veiling by staying confined to private, female-only spaces. Similarly, men attempt to hide, or "veil," their masculine heterosexuality in certain intimate settings, and this phenomenon has been studied in the case of male domestic workers in North India who downplay their sexuality to make themselves appear less threatening in the homes of their female supervisors (Chopra 2006).

The cycle rickshaw is a semi-public, yet intimate space in which passengers and driver are positioned in close physical proximity and share the experience of bumping through traffic together. They can easily overhear one another's conversations, and the rickshaw man's laboring

body is on display for his passengers, while his passengers sometimes need his physical assistance to step onto or off the rickshaw. I have observed how this intimate space “becomes an interactive space of muting that enables cross-sex and cross-class interactions between male worker and female employer” (Chopra 2006, 158). For instance, fictitious brother-sister kinship terms of address were used in interactions between rickshaw men and Delhi girls. Such terms implied that flirtation and sex would be improper within the relationship.²³ Sometimes, though, even the use of friendly terms of address were forgone, and during the whole encounter a rickshaw man would say only one word — his price — while the equally taciturn Delhi girl would utter only the name of her destination. I did not collect interviews from Delhi girls, but during their interactions with rickshaw men I observed that they minimized eye contact with their drivers and, in general, did their best to show a lack of interest in the rickshaw men (which also signified their superior social statuses) by skipping small talk and avoiding smiling. In the intimate space of the rickshaw, the fact that the driver-customer relationships were configured through, and constrained by, social power became glaring, almost determining. Rickshaw men were reluctant to talk on their cell phones because they were afraid of annoying their passengers, but it was common practice for their customers to carry on phone conversations in the backseat during the ride. I knew a young woman who would pretend to be on her cell phone with a male relative whenever she rode in rickshaws at night, because it gave her a sense of security against the threat that she perceived of being sexually assaulted by her rickshaw driver on a dark road.

If “body styles are critical in negating sexuality and are part of the process of desexualization” (Chopra 2006, 158), then rickshaw men had a practical understanding of this and

²³ The de-sexualizing power of applying “non-joking” fictitious kinship terms to a relationship can be more fully appreciated by examining a case where male and female co-workers applied “joking” fictitious kinship terms of *devar-bhabhi* (brother-in-law and sister-in-law) to their relationships in order to legitimize flirtation (Parry 2001, 807-808).

often avoided turning around to face their female passengers when they had reached their destination, instead waiting for the women to reach out and offer them payment. Rickshaw men did not make a habit of smiling at their female customers, and they avoided approaching women on the street for anything other than to offer their taxi services. Some rickshaw men would make a dramatic show of their role as a laborer-for-hire by slapping the dust from the passenger seats of their rickshaws to invite a Delhi girl to sit. Even while hopelessly stuck in a massive traffic jam with a passenger, rickshaw men would perform their diligence as a service providers by standing up on the pedals and scouting for a clear lane that did not exist, by shouting to the drivers of other rickshaws or vehicles who obviously could not move anywhere to pull ahead, or by turning their handlebars to and fro while spinning their pedals backwards as if maneuvering through the traffic but not actually going anywhere. The anti-productivist urge was real (see Chapter 2), and rickshaw men had no problem lazing about or declining fares, but once they entered negotiations with a potential customer, and while they were providing service, the ideal was to present themselves as industrious, sexually non-threatening, workers.

“Veiling” of male heterosexuality was the rule, however there were exceptions. Rickshaw men knew that they would be seen as threatening and “dirty” if they did not wear nice clothing, but it was difficult for them to afford new clothing, or to maintain the few articles of clothing that they owned in Delhi. They wore ripped and dirty clothing, and sometimes their clothing would fall apart on the job and they would have to make do, like when Hosein’s pants split open, much to the amusement of his workmates, and he had to tie a scarf around his waist for the rest of the day to cover the problem. During the rainy season, the men were constantly soaked, and their tattered clothing would become transparent and cling to their bodies. It was impossible to entirely “mute” their straining muscles from the view of their passengers who sat directly behind. The rickshaw

men were, moreover, still able to “flex” their masculinity a bit when transporting Delhi girls by exhibiting their navigational skills. They did this even though Delhi girls were not known to express great appreciation for receiving excellent service, because the men’s biggest motivation was completing their trips quickly and efficiently so that they could rest or take more fares. But, perhaps to recuperate the dignity lost from toiling subserviently for little money, the men would recount to me how their female passengers had become confused about directions and had needed to rely on their rickshaw driver’s stronger familiarity with the city’s neighborhoods and addresses. The individual flare and masculine talent for knowledgeable driving that some rickshaw men performed was a notable exception to the rule of downplaying masculinity in the customer-servant relationship, and such performances were so tightly bound with the service that the rickshaw men were selling that “veiling” them was not usually advantageous. Another exception might be the performances of a small number of rickshaw men (particularly in the Paharganj, Jama Masjid, and Red Ford areas) who specialized in hustling foreign tourists by building confidence through affective strategies.

It was not considered part of the job or recognized as a formal requirement for being a rickshaw puller, but the manner in which the rickshaw men worked was deeply influenced by the understanding that a rickshaw man who was perceived to flirt or flaunt his sexuality was at risk of serious reprisals. Most interactions with customers, and with Delhi girls in particular, were practiced so as to desexualize the relationships. Male sexuality was therefore “veiled” whenever possible during the labor performance, and the rickshaw men carried out their labor with speech patterns and body language that showed deference and a lack of interest in their customers as anything but customers. Sometimes their labor performances displayed a thin veneer of *bhai-bahen* faux friendliness, but they were permeated with icy affects. In North India, in intimate spaces

where male veiling is practiced, “the absence of intimacy comes to define the intimate space” (Mody 2019, 263), and in rickshaw pulling the dictum “sex sells” rang hollow.

The intimacy that cycle rickshaw pullers cultivated and wished to cultivate resembled, to an extent, a type of Indian male sexuality postulated as, “the wanting-and-not-wanting of the western or westernised Indian woman” (Srivastava 2007, 194). Delhi girls represented a better social status and higher level of material comfort from which the rickshaw men were excluded, and every day in the city they were reminded of their exclusion. Oftentimes it was Delhi girls who reminded them by treating them as untouchable and under-compensating them for their services. Rickshaw men’s sexual attraction for Delhi girls was bound up with more ambivalent or negative feelings for them that were formed in part against the foil of the “traditional” and conservative village woman, and in part within the confines of the driver-rider relationship in Delhi. Not far behind these negative feelings were their experiences or suspicions that Delhi girls could leverage their class and caste advantages to harm them as they pleased. It makes sense, then, to say that for service-class men from the countryside, “A creature of the city, the ‘strong aurat’ offers both the possibility of physical and ideological engagement with modernity and also the danger that her ‘powers’ — and hence the experience of the engagement — may not be controllable” (Srivastava 2007, 200). This sexuality, as Srivastava describes it, applies to poor men comprising a rural to urban demographic shift. Upon being absorbed by expanding urban centers of production and consumption, they are said to experience confusion — confusion stemming from the dissolution of traditional kinship bonds, and from being presented with an array of “modern” and “traditional” consumption opportunities — and consequently perpetually teeter between village masculinity and “modern” manhood (Srivastava 2007, 125 & 153).

There is an important distinction, however, between cycle rickshaw pullers and the service-class men who Srivastava writes about. The men who I studied were resolutely fixed on eventually returning to their permanent homes in their villages. Although they spent months at a time in Delhi, and some continued their circular migration for decades, they only ever viewed Delhi as a pit-stop. The “wanting” part of a “wanting-and-not-wanting” sexuality was not for rickshaw men loaded with a desire to merge with urban modernity as it was for the poor neo-urbanites described by Srivastava. Rather it was located in what Manoj self-consciously referred to as loneliness-induced sexual “fantasies” in the interim. It was an exciting way to kill time at work but not a practical or fulfilling activity outside of what informants glossed as “timepass” situations. Rickshaw pullers’ encounters with Delhi girls engendered scopophilia and misogynistic jokes that had little meaning for the men beyond the realm of workday amusement. However, their intimate interactions with the women required the veiling of their masculine sexuality, and this meant that the way they worked as rickshaw drivers was inflected with a subdued performance of gendered sexuality, along with a perhaps compensatory performance of industriousness and subservience.

3.4 Sex Workers

North Indian society stigmatizes sex outside of marriage, and many rickshaw men, too, took very negative views of it. Most respondents scoffed at the question of whether they hire sex workers. “Why not?” “Because I just don’t. Because it seems dirty to me. It seems bad to me. We’re doing hard work, we’re earning money. At home everything is available. Why take this out of our earnings?” Most cycle rickshaw men’s views of sex outside of marriage align with other

North Indian labor-class men's opinions of it, "as their unreasonable craving for sexual pleasure which, putatively, [is] already available to them through marriage" (George 2006, 44).

Cycle rickshaw men who do pay for sex in Delhi are aware that others may view it negatively, so they are not usually inclined to openly discuss it. For the first year and a half that I knew Aandhit, he denied buying sex in Delhi. It was only after I had stayed with him in his West Bengal village, after I had helped carry his young son on a long and grueling trip to visit their in-laws, and after I had begun pulling a rickshaw myself that he changed his tune. We were killing time together when, without any prompting, he asked, "Do you want to go see some place?" I was a little surprised to learn that he meant a brothel. I agreed and he pedaled us across a major highway, and into an area of the city to which I had never been. He locked up his rickshaw and we walked into a maze of crowded alleyways in a working-class neighborhood. We pushed through the alleyways until they became dark footpaths too narrow for us to walk side by side. The rickshaw man led us off the footpath through an unmarked door and into a building that was still under construction. We stepped over some piles of bricks and dirt, and followed a ramp made of earth into a gloomy corridor. On the opposite side of the corridor, we entered a room that smelled like damp earth, and I realized I was in the brothel. It was a budget brothel for labor-class men like cycle rickshaw pullers, and it has been argued that urban sites catering to the sexuality of low-income male migrants from the countryside can be key resources for understanding their masculinity and the anxieties they face in the city (Srivastava 2007, 124).

The windowless room was an area of about three by six meters, and a couple of dim yellow light bulbs dangled from the low ceiling. On my right, a long platform nearly one meter high was pushed against the sparse brick wall. A sad brown couch was decomposing against the opposite wall, and there was a narrow walkway between the two pieces of furniture. My knee-jerk

impression of the physical space of the room was that it was a disgusting place and I hoped we would not have to spend a lot of time there. Months later, I read Srivastava's (2007) ruminations on the shabby production quality of "footpath pornography." The genre offers erotic images of "modern" women for a primary audience of poor urban males. Considering the problematic sexuality that "modern" women represent to poor rural-urban migrant men, desire for them might be thought of as morally dubious or "degraded." Srivastava muses that, "A degraded desire encounters its 'satisfaction' in degraded aesthetics, which in turn transforms these - now suitably degraded - women into the proper objects of such desire; it is as if this desire is only comfortable in the company of like aesthetics" (182). Such pornography of low-quality production was available in Delhi but, interestingly, the many rickshaw men who were mesmerized by high-resolution pornographic videos of Western women on their mobile phones had evidently missed the memo and voiced no complaints about having their desires satisfied in 5G quality. Shabby magazines and cyber porn are both partly responsible for, and responses to, the discursive construction of the "modern" woman. The brothel that smelled like warm clay, which had lured Aandhit across town that afternoon was, however, a different conceptual knot. Three dark-skinned Hindi and Bengali speaking women were relaxing on the platform. The room was grotty but the women were neatly dressed in traditional saris and adornments. This was a footpath market, a poor urban market, selling not degraded fantasies of "modernity," but a readily intelligible village brand — Bengali Village Woman.

Aandhit introduced me to the women and explained my purpose as a researcher. The oldest woman was in charge, and she confirmed that Aandhit had visited her brothel several times. I learned that she and one of the younger sex workers were from villages in West Bengal, while the third woman was probably also Bengali, but maybe Nepali. Sex workers of all genders, of many

ethnicities and nationalities, and catering to buyers of all economic strata, worked in South Delhi, contributing to conditions of “surplus consumerism” which inculcates “surplus subjectivity” and leads to “undisciplined desire” (Srivastava 2007, 185-187) perhaps, for example, for a white sex worker from Russia wearing a traditional Indian *sari*, or maybe for a dark-skinned Tamil sex worker in high heels. It is true that rickshaw men could never afford Delhi’s high-end escorts, but the men I knew exercised agency in selecting a brothel staffed by women from West Bengal instead of any of the other inexpensive brothels nearby that were staffed by sex workers from South India, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, or Nepal. Their choices were indicative of their male heterosexual orientations and, evidently, of a part of their desire that was decidedly “disciplined” and directed towards women with whom they shared similar cultural backgrounds.²⁴

Across from the women, sunken into the remains of the plush brown couch, sat two men who, to my surprise, I immediately recognized. One was an ice cream vendor who worked near *Taakat Chawk*, and who often hung out with the rickshaw pullers, and the other was Manoj! I was glad to see the familiar faces because I had been a little nervous, wondering how safe it was for me to be in this strange place. Manoj and Aandhit knew each other well because they grew up together in the same village, had many mutual friends, and shared similar socio-economic backgrounds with but one sometimes meaningful exception: Aandhit was a Muslim and Manoj was a Hindu. The two worked together from the same street corner, and I later learned that it was Manoj who led Aandhit to this brothel in the first place, while Manoj himself came to know about it through the ice cream vendor. Aandhit did not seem surprised to see them, nor did it seem as

²⁴ Of the rickshaw men who hired sex workers, not all of them chose to hire sex workers who shared their ethnic backgrounds. I knew a rickshaw man from Rajasthan who would only have sex with sex workers from Afghanistan, and for him there was no meaning in it besides sexual pleasure.

though he had planned to meet them there. I greeted the men and noticed that Manoj, who did not say much, was pretty drunk or high.

The older woman pushed the thick, hot air around her face with a plastic hand fan and, noticing that Manoj was nodding off, she directed one of the younger women to rouse him and handed her a condom. The young sex worker coaxed Manoj to his feet and then walked him out of the room, to a separate room. Aandhit relaxed on the couch, facing the remaining sex workers and myself as we sat on the platform, and he sipped a type of tea they served him that is popular around Kolkata but less common in Delhi. They spoke in a mix of Hindi and Bengali, using the familiar/non-formal registers of speech, and exchanging warm smiles. They talked about when they were returning to their villages, about the weather in their home districts, and about how cycle rickshaw pulling was going. It was a casual and cordial exchange, marked for me by the way Aandhit had managed to jettison his normally stormy demeanor. I had not seen the man's sweet personality shine through like this since I had watched him interact with his family in his village almost a year prior. Before long, Manoj, now a sweaty and intoxicated mess, re-entered the room and staggered back to his seat on the couch. The same young sex worker then led Aandhit out.

The younger of the two remaining women began trying to convince me to buy sex from her (it crossed my mind that Aandhit may have led me here in hopes of earning a commission on any such possible transaction, but even if he did, I do not think it significantly changes my findings). Our conversation was friendly and everyone in the room found it entertaining. "C'mon! Do it just once, make love." "My heart's not in it." "What does that matter! Just ten minutes, relax, you're not too old." Then Manoj, perking up, entreated me to, "Go ahead, go with her, do a prayer-offering" [*jao, uski saat jao, ek puja karo*], as he rotated his hands in a circular motion to pantomime the way that a flaming oil lamp is often waved in front of an idol during a prayer-

offering at a temple. “What nonsense is he talking?” I asked. The head woman enthusiastically explained, “He’s talking about doing a prayer-offering. This place is their temple. You should go with her, her pussy’s very tight.” “Their temple?” I faltered, “What are you talking about?” “I’m saying that our place here is their temple. Like Sikh people go to gurudwaras, like Christian people go to church, our place here is these people’s temple. Like people worship God, these folk worship pussy. They need to fuck the pussy.” She was smiling warmly, maybe laughing a little, and the younger sex worker appeared to glow with happiness at her boss’s description of things. Manoj was looking meek, spacey, sitting quietly, not agreeing but not disagreeing. By the time Aandhit and I left the brothel, he was perspiring heavily and drifting in and out of the moment. He needed that couch for another couple hours and the women did not seem to mind.

As we returned to the rickshaw, Aandhit defaulted to an agitated state. Looking cross, he jabbed his index finger in the air for effect and growled that his brother Akyaar, with whom he shared a room in Delhi, did not know that he went to the brothel and that I should not tell him. A day or two later, Manoj told me the same thing — that I should not tell anyone I saw him at the brothel. Manoj and Aandhit’s shared interest in having extra-marital sex in Delhi puts them in an alliance that overrides communal differences. It would have been silly to insist on a Hindu-versus-Muslim analytic when they were sitting together on the couch in the brothel, and when, after all, on the brothel boss’s word, they both worshiped the same thing.

I asked Aandhit, “What did they mean by ‘Do a prayer-offering’?” and he elaborated on the metaphor to help me understand it: “People go to the temple, right? You’ve seen? They go outside their homes, they go to work, they say bad things, they do bad things, then they go to the temple. They do the fire like this [he moved his hands in a circle] and bring the smoke like this [he waved his hands towards his face as if wafting smoke]. They go there after work, they go there to

get clean, to relax. The temple is clean and peaceful, they sit there and relax, and enjoyment comes to them [*vahaan baithte hain, araam karte hain, unhe mazaa aata hain*]. They do a prayer-offering, relax in the temple. It's like that for us." When Aandhit equated going to a brothel with visiting a temple, he evoked relaxation, purification, and enjoyment and he implied that purchasing sex had a restorative effect against the dirty, bad, and depleting experience of labor migration. Other rickshaw men told me on various occasions in no uncertain terms that they were able to endure longer migration stints in Delhi thanks to their interactions with sex workers.²⁵

The restorative function of sex was a major theme for the men, and they also considered the related theme of one's supposed need for sex when they justified the purchase of sex, as demonstrated in an interview that I conducted with Manoj in his rickshaw on the side of a quiet street a few days after we met at the brothel. I asked him, "How did you take the decision to have sex there? What did you say to yourself?" This was his reply:

I said to myself, 'don't go,' 'I won't go,' but then I took customers [to the neighborhood where the brothel is located] and I wandered around nearby and in this way eventually ended up there. [Buying sex] is no good. I've got a wife and kids, right? It's no good, but I'm here, away from my wife. She isn't here, so what can I do? Us folk come and stay here for five or six months. So once in a while we need to go [to the brothel]. You can go according to your heart. For me, it's alright to go. But if you go time and time again then your health will get bad. If you go once every two months, every four months, every five months, it won't be a problem. If you go four or five times in a month, then your health will get bad. Or your wife can find out, so I go secretly and don't tell anyone.

²⁵ While some men believed that sex with sex workers could refresh them such that they would be able to tolerate longer periods of work, none of them reported that visiting brothels could mitigate the more intractable problem of somatic "drying out" that took place over time, as discussed in the previous chapter.

As he spoke, his gaze wandered around the tops of the trees that lined the street, and I waited for his big peaceful eyes to drift back to me before continuing: “And when you return to your wife, how do you feel?” “So the first time I went to the brothel, and then three months later I went to the village, I actually forgot about it!” Manoj thought there were risks and moral dilemmas in hiring sex workers, but they did not weigh so heavily on his mind if it was done secretly and in moderation. The interview also showed that he regarded his interactions with sex workers as necessary substitutions for the interactions with his wife that were temporarily unavailable (“She isn’t here, so what can I do? [...] once in a while we need to go [to the brothel]”), and over the years of my fieldwork the idea popped up in similar statements made by a number of different rickshaw men.

Within a rationalizing economic system that attempts to reduce laborers to human motors, proletarian men in Delhi sometimes glibly express a functionalist view of sex within which their bodies are seen to require sex like a machine requires an oil change (Ramaswami 2006, 215). However, in candid statements and in the ways that they practice their sexual relationships, they express an abundance of extra-economic meaning (Ramaswami 2006, 225). Aandhit and Manoj were no exceptions; while they spoke of the rejuvenating effect that sex had on their laboring bodies, their interactions with sex workers in the sweaty brothel-temple that smelled like clay were by no means strictly sexual. The relaxation and enjoyment they purchased were infused with a good deal of non-physical intimacy and, tellingly, in conceiving of their intimate interactions as “*puja*,” they were not the first male laborers in Delhi to use religious imagery to describe erotic acts. Delhi’s working poor exhibit a flair for mixing sexual and religious imagery as they participate in sexualized work-time shenanigans (Ramaswami 2006, 208). This type of *mazaak* (humor) encourages “unities of soul between and across genders” (Ramaswami 2006, 226), and

provides an outlet for workers to exercise their capacities for wit, creativity, and merrymaking in the otherwise stultifying work context (Ramaswami 2006, 222). Such practices can be seen as “attempts to live beyond bare economic necessity” (Ramaswami, 2006, 203), and I believe that the gregariousness that permeated the men’s brothel interactions should be understood similarly. The *mazaa* (enjoyment) of the brothel-temple, just as well as the erotic *mazaak* analyzed by Ramaswami, can be an assertion of, “the urge and passion to create, connect, and unify, and the desire to live, contra the drives of mere self-preservation” (Ramaswami 2006, 222). In fostering this type of intimacy, the rickshaw men selected a brothel staffed by Bengali women instead of one with Afghani or Sri Lankan women, and they nurtured familiarity and friendliness with the women through shared native language and references in their speech that indexed common cultural and regional identities. They talked about home with the women and relished shared cultural minutiae. The conviviality they produced ran beyond simple restoration of the men’s productive energies, and prefigured a life centered around rich sociality. Aandhit could have gotten away with making less small talk about the West Bengal weather and mango harvest, or without lingering to sip tea on the musty couch, but a prayer-offering sufficiently bereft of such *mazaa* was merely an oil change.

Although sex workers participated in the manufacturing of this intimacy, it should not be assumed that they had the same understanding of the interactions as their customers. The sex workers were highly stigmatized and wielded even less social power than their labor-class customers. They were under strong economic compulsion to create a marketable affective experience, and they worked under the very real possibility of violence being directed at them by their customers, the state, and/or xenophobic, misogynistic, and puritanical people in the neighborhood. While the sex workers must be considered as agentive strategists, and it should be

supposed that their affective performances were not always sincere, it should be kept in mind that sincerity is not vital to the fabrication of intimacy. More than the genuineness of the actors' performances, I am interested in the customers' abilities to set the terms of the interactions. The rickshaw men chose when they came and went from the brothel, thus initiating, consuming, and terminating the experience when it suited them. Intimate experiences are sometimes compartmentalized, or "bounded," in the West when conditions of late capitalism make it difficult to practice traditional models of intimacy (Bernstein 2007), and the phenomenon urges a consideration of how intentionally delimited forms of intimacy in other parts of the world might be related to economic roles.

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, rickshaw men insisted that their foremost motivation for migrating was to earn money for their families. Some of them bought sex in Delhi, but they denied that they migrated for this purpose. There were cheap brothels in the urban center in their home district, which meant that if they wanted to buy sex, particularly from co-ethnics, they did not need to come to Delhi to do it. Sex and sexual desire did not inspire migration to Delhi and, as explained in Chapter Two, there is good reason to believe that working in Delhi was actually experienced as antagonistic to their ability to have sex. From time to time someone would accuse a rickshaw man of frittering away all his earnings on sex workers. But while rickshaw men like Aandhit and Manoj revealed quite a lot to me over time about their sexual practices, they never said or implied that they lingered or got stuck in Delhi as a result of wasting all their money on sex workers.²⁶ On the contrary, their statements suggest that satisfying their masculine heterosexual desire through intimate interactions with sex workers refreshed them and allowed

²⁶ Sex at brothels that catered to labor-class customers ranged in price and cost a rickshaw man roughly between a quarter of, and the entirety of, a single day's earnings.

them to stay longer in Delhi and hence increased their overall earnings. Whereas their interactions with Delhi girls affected the manner in which they performed their labor, their interactions with sex workers tended to increase their willingness to endure longer stints of that labor. Rickshaw men paid for a stopgap replacement for the physical satisfaction they got from sex with their wives, and in addition to this, another important purpose of visiting brothels appeared to be achieving an emotional return to the village. This is not to say that intimacy produced in the brothel was the same as that produced in the village. At least a few of the men probably found pleasure in their brothel interactions simply because they were with women who were not their wives (none of them, however, told me that this was the case). It would be reasonable to conclude, though, that the heterosexual sexuality that some of the men manifested in the city partly consisted of desire for intimacy that was an approximation of a form of intimacy that was normally available to them in their villages. And while many rural-urban transplants develop this type of desire within, and in response to, an existence of interminable, unfulfilled longing to return to their villages (Srivastava 2007, 169), the rickshaw men fully expected to return to their villages in the near future, which ensured both the temporal boundedness of their interactions with sex workers, and the boundedness of the meaning of those interactions as short-lived substitutions.

3.5 Wives

It is regularly asserted that husband-wife relationships are the bedrock of North Indian society (Derne 1995; Patel 2005; Edathumparambil 2017), and “the family remains the key arena for the location of love and the erotic in modern India” (Dwyer 2000, 49). Furthermore, heterosexual marriage is considered an indispensable part of “the form of masculinity that occupies

a hegemonic status” in North India (Mishra 2018, 32). It is unsurprising, then, that rickshaw men’s relationships with their wives were at the center of their lives even during their migration to Delhi. The men’s families depended on them to remit money, and the men depended on their wives to take care of their house, children, animals, and crops. Marriage was also a fundamental marker of social status, and it was the only acceptable framework for undertaking the all-important project of producing children and marrying them well. While marriage was crucial for social reproduction and status, as well as economic well-being, it tended to be complicated when love, longing, jealousy, and resentment entered the picture, sometimes all at once. Unlike the other types of intimate relationships examined in this chapter, the men’s relationships with their wives lasted much longer and were a consequential part of their lives over the course of many years in most cases. And while Delhi girls and sex workers influenced the way that rickshaw men worked, and how long they were willing to stay and work in Delhi, the intricacies of the men’s relationships with their wives often generated the reasons for when and why to migrate, especially when returning to the village.

It was common to hear that one or another of the rickshaw men’s wives was calling her husband home (*ghar bulaana*). When a man’s wife called him home, it meant that she had contacted him while he was in Delhi and had urged or demanded that he return to their home in the village. I learned more about it by interviewing a woman in her home in the village while her husband was operating a rickshaw in Delhi. I was accompanied by another rickshaw man who was a family friend and who was assumed to be a blood relative of the husband even though the exact relationship was unclear. A couple adult female neighbors also joined us, and we sipped tea together while our host spoke:

When I married him, I didn’t know that he was going to Delhi and pulling a rickshaw. I was alone here for five or six months. I felt lonely and sad. There was

no one here at home and I had to do all the housework myself. I had seen cycle rickshaw pullers in Malda Town, so I understood that much about what my husband was doing in Delhi. And I thought it was a very dirty job, a low-status job [*cchota kaam*]. My family had always said that rickshaw work is no good. And yes, I did think it's bad work. There is a lot of hard work in the heat. It's hard work, a lot of trouble in the heat carrying big passengers. You could have an accident. I called him and asked how work was going, and after a couple months I asked him to come home. He said he would come home as soon as possible, but that work was *mandaa* and he needed to stay in Delhi for some time. If work is down, and money's not coming, then come home! But he says, 'I need to work more, need to save for the kid's education.' I don't like staying alone without him. I get lonely. [...] I call him from the field, I ask how he's doing, I tell him to return soon.

Loneliness and worry for their husbands' wellbeing prompted wives to summon their husbands home. They were also called home to provide material support beyond remittances such as help around the house or with childcare, or for help making religious pilgrimages or trips to visit relatives. Rickshaw men's vested interests in these activities and projects made it understandable that calls for them to return home were taken seriously. But the wives of migrant men who work in the informal transportation sector may also feel anxiety that their husbands will cheat on them while they are away (Zhang 2011, 140), and the rickshaw men contended that being called home was often an attempt by their wives to obviate the lure of the brothel. "Does your wife call you back?" "Yes, she'll start calling me in two or three months. I tell her that I'll come in a month or so." "What's her aim?" "Ah! She's worried that I might go with other women. I'm married. She says [return home] for a couple weeks, then you can go do your work in Delhi."

Possessiveness colored husband-wife intimacy, and it was often the men who behaved possessively. Their jokes at work about being called home help bring their possessiveness into focus. Laxmi, in particular, never tired of this type of joke, and he had a playful look on his face

as he gestured towards Akyaar and explained to me loudly so that Akyaar could hear, “His wife is calling him and telling him to come [back to his home in their village]. She’s calling him home (*vo use ghar bulaa rahi hai*) but he hasn’t made enough money so he can’t go.” Akyaar retaliated by making lewd comments about Laxmi’s wife. It was not long until Akyaar said something horrible enough to make Laxmi pounce on him and lightly strangle him. Akyaar sputtered on about how bad Laxmi’s wife’s vagina smelled, and Laxmi strangled him more vigorously. Later, Akyaar was a good sport about explaining this genre of joke:

If someone has come here for work, and it’s been ten days or fifteen days, or a month, then suddenly going back home is funny. He needs sex or his wife needs sex. We don’t know about each other’s wives, it’s just a joke. We just say this: ‘You haven’t been home for a long time, your wife is calling you.’ It’s a joke. It’s more funny to talk about wives because wives are everyone’s private cars [used the English phrase, private cars], her husband’s private car. Because your wife gives you love, conversation, amusement, on the phone... In your life, she is like a private car that drives your life. You drive together with her. Do you love someone besides your girlfriend?

I answered, “No,” and he continued, “You love her, she is your private car. If another cycle rickshaw puller said that, ‘I love your girlfriend,’ you’d get mad, right?” I answered, “Yes,” and he concluded, “That’s just how it is. When we joke about each other’s wives, they get mad because for each one this is private.” His explanation touched upon the ideals of love, sex, and privacy in husband-wife relationships. He suggested that this genre of jokes stirs the sense of entitlement that men have to exclusive intimate and sexual access to their wives. Other poor migrant workers in North India — both men and women — objectify their sexual partners as their “property,” and as “things” or “stuff” to be consumed for pleasure, and they express jealousy when their presumed exclusive property rights are threatened or violated (Shah 2006, 101; Ramaswami 2006, 216-217;

on Indian men's jealousy see also McDuié-Ra 2012, 122; Kakar 1990, 17-19). In line with these widespread ideologies of intimacy, Akyaar claimed that a man's wife should serve as his private property.

Wives being considered private property implied that husbands should have control in their marriages, and therefore men became irked by suggestions that their wives were calling them home because it threw their control over their marriages into question. When labor-class men in Delhi tease their workmates about being controlled by their wives, or about their wives' promiscuity, it hints at anxiety about living up to important masculine ideals (Ramaswami 2006, 220 & 225). The anxiety was laid bare by the fact that actually getting called home by one's wife was no joking matter. When one of the rickshaw men who had just been on the phone with his wife said that she was calling him home, Akyaar overheard and muttered, "It's a dirty thing to do what she's doing. She can't sleep at night, she misses him, her heartaches." "So, what is a wife supposed to say when you talk to her?" I wondered. "She's supposed to ask how it's going, how your health is, tell you about the kids, but she's not supposed to call you home like that. It gives us a lot of tension." The men worried about losing control over their marriages, and also about what their wives might say if they did not return quickly enough when they were called for. In North India, "women's discourses on men's actions critically shape men's honor" (George 2006, 36), and rickshaw men's perception that their wives might accuse them of infidelity if they did not return home quickly enough held some sway over their decisions about when and why to return to their villages.

Another trope I encountered was that of the runaway wife. If a man's wife "ran away" (*bhaag jaana*) it meant she abandoned her duties at her husband's home and went to stay elsewhere. Running away generally signaled a woman's dissatisfaction with her husband. It could, for example, mean that she had returned to her natal village in protest of not receiving enough

remittances, in which case remedying the situation could be as simple as her husband sending along the money that she expected. It could also mean that she had abandoned him in a more permanent way, tantamount to divorce. Such a possibility was not taken lightly since a break-up in the context of labor migration “can be a critical, life-threatening event...as it results not only in the loss of the relationship but also in exposure to economic vulnerability” (Kwon 2015, 485). The phenomenon of brides running away has been examined in relation to the situation in a central Indian industrial town where a relatively small, privileged group of men from the industrial working-class gained secure employment in a government-run factory. When the men were able to secure such “modern” jobs, their marriages consequently changed to include less gender equality and less freedom for their wives to exit their marriages (Parry 2001). My study intentionally avoids commenting on the type or level of modernity that might be associated with the job of cycle rickshaw pulling, and I do not know the divorce rates of cycle rickshaw men. But the rickshaw men’s fixation on the potential for their wives to “run away” at very least revealed an insecurity that was frequently exacerbated by the migration, low pay, and stigma of their job. The men exploited these insecurities for a laugh; when a fellow worker was upset, no matter the real cause, they would tease him by saying that his wife had run away. Goaded one’s workmate in this manner implied that he was failing at performing the breadwinner role, the sexual role, or both.

Even if the men’s wives were not threatening to run away, the men worried that they might cheat. There is a strand of anxiety carried by many Indian men that is based in a belief that their wives have uncontrollable and insatiable sexual appetites. Accordingly, there is always a danger that their wives will disgrace them by cheating. Their love, intimacy, and caring for their wives is wrapped up with this anxiety, and they believe it is their duty as proper husbands to protect their

wives from their own sexual improprieties as well as from those of possible seducers (Kakar 1990, 17-19). Anxieties like these interfered with the rickshaw men's labor to the extent that they would sometimes stop working and return to the village to attend to the masculine ideal of protecting their wives from their sexual urges. Jaykant was a rickshaw puller who grew the nail on his pinkie finger long until it began to curl, and he painted it with cherry-red nail polish. He was unusual among the men who I met in that, in addition to his normal rickshaw pulling, he touted for a brothel staffed by female Afghani sex workers. He was not, however, unusual in his anxiety about his wife's (un)faithfulness, and for six months he obsessed over the idea that his wife was cheating on him while he was away in Delhi. He could no longer focus on his work in Delhi, and he returned to his village to consult with a woman who practiced magic (*zaadu karne walli*). He paid the witch five thousand rupees to make him a locket that he tied to the several flashy bracelets and chains which he wore around his wrist, and that was supposed to keep his wife faithful. Along with the locket he obtained a potion for curbing his wife's unfaithfulness, and he surreptitiously mixed it into her tea. Jaykant's story is significant because it suggests that contemporaneous with a "passionate modernity" as described by Srivastava (2007) where Delhi markets sell poor migrants village aesthetics mixed with erotic international styles or "modern" scientific advice, there exists among male rural-urban circular migrants a preference for managing some of their most important sexual relationships according to village traditions and, crucially, they go back to the village to do so.

When rickshaw men were not in the village, they spent an enormous amount of time on their cell phones with their wives and families. They called them multiple times per day, and some of them were in the habit of leaving calls running on speaker phone for long periods of time as they pedaled around Delhi. This allowed them to virtually hang out with their loved ones and listen

in on the day-to-day conversations in their homes. Sometimes I had to ask the men to stop taking calls from their wives so they could concentrate on the interviews that I was trying to conduct. Cell phones are an important way for migrant men to stay in touch with their wives (Zhang 2011, 137), and in India cell phones are an important tool for creating and maintaining romantic relationships, as well as a means for reinforcing traditional and hierarchical gender relations (Doron and Jeffrey 2013, 166). Rickshaw men's use of cell phones should be considered as a method of surveillance and control over their wives and children, and at the same time their calls nurtured intimacy. I remember celebrating Eid with Akyaar, Aandhit, and a few other rickshaw pullers in Delhi. They were absorbed in their phones, talking with their wives, asking if they had eaten, asking how their children were doing, giving short math lessons to their children, and so on. Akyaar leaned over to let me watch as he scrolled through photographs from his village on his phone. He showed me many pictures of his wife and children, smiling warmly while he gazed at them and tried to narrate: "She's ten years old now...he's only eight years old...this is my wife at her village." These men would have preferred to be with their families, and they were making do with digital connections.

Every day I witnessed the rickshaw men having warm conversations with their wives on their phones, but the ethnographic moment involving a phone that best illustrated the deep connection that most of my informants have with their wives was a little bit unusual. It happened during an interview with Panchim, whose wife had died a couple years earlier. We sat in his rickshaw near the metro station, sucking in the hazy, particle-filled air, and immersed in the cacophony of screeching automobile brakes and horns. I asked, "So when your wife was alive, did you have any fear that she would leave you when you were here and she was there?" "No, I used to call her...when [her] health got bad." At this point Panchim began hiccupping. He had become a heavy drinker and it caused him to hiccup a lot. As we continued the interview, I realized that

the little convulsions were also the way that he cried. “She told me to recharge my mobile. I recharged it. Then she told me that she had got a fever. Then I phoned the doctor. I’ve got...[sic] several sons, no? Then they took her to the doctor. They kept giving her treatment until right when it was over. She died. I had come to Delhi. We needed money, so I had come to Delhi. I was in Delhi only ten days, then she died. They put her on ice. I came back in twenty-four hours, and then they put her on wood and cremated her. This is her mobile.” He pulled an old button phone from his pocket — one that was different than the phone that he normally used. “I used to give her missed calls, we’d keep on talking.” The hiccups stopped after he stopped speaking, and everywhere horns blasted.

Men in India (Derne 1995, 90-94) and elsewhere (Zhang 2011, 138) may avoid publicly discussing emotional and sexual intimacy with their wives, but privately they speak of the importance and strength of such bonds. During an in-depth interview Akyaar related the experience of being detached from the people he loves saying,

At night when I go to sleep, then I feel very lonely. If I’m feeling very lonely, then I can’t sleep. I’ll think and think for two hours. During the day I talk [on the phone] to my family three or four times. At night I can’t talk to them because the kids go to sleep or someone else has to use the phone. Sometimes I will talk to my brother who also pulls a rickshaw. I’ll say ‘Are you sleeping? I can’t sleep. I miss my home. I miss sleeping with my wife. I miss being with my children.’ I think about spending time with them, and it is for them that I go back. I think of spending time with them and seeing them. I’m feeling very lonely.

Dozens of other rickshaw pullers have quietly told of similar heartaches. When I accompanied Akyaar to his village, he accommodated me in his two-room house. The first night I shared a bed in one room with him and one of his three children, while his wife shared the bed in the other room with the other children. The next night, I was shifted nearby to Aandhit’s house, and Akyaar and

his wife put their kids and goats in one room and took the other room to themselves. Especially for the first week of my stay, I was asked to shift back and forth almost every night. It is possible that the men were calculating to make the anthropologist equally indebted to them, but I believe that the simpler explanation — that they each were eager for alone-time with their wives — is the better explanation.

I do not mean to romanticize the relationships between cycle rickshaw pullers and their wives. Domestic chores were divided unevenly and there was a lot of arguing, especially over money. A few times I saw domestic violence. The intimate relationships that cycle rickshaw men maintained with their wives were fraught with jealousy and anxiety while also contained caring and supportive practices. The point is that these very complicated, and relatively enduring, intimate relationships had significant influence on the men's migratory patterns, and this influence played out through tropes such as being called home, rushing back to catch a runaway wife, returning to discourage cheating, or hopping a village-bound train to ease loneliness and to satiate the desire for sex. The latter applied to Laxmi, who one afternoon was standing around making lewd gestures under the metro station. I commented to his workmate that, "He's quite crazy." His workmate said, "He hasn't been home for three months." "What does that mean?" "He hasn't fucked for three months." Laxmi, could hear our commentary, and I asked him, "Is that so?" "That's right!" he proudly admitted. "When are you going home?" "Next month, then I can have sex, put it in the pussy, very fun!" he declared as he opened his arms and threw his head back in a gesture of abandoning oneself to pleasures. "I'm going to relax..."

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has described the heterosexual intimacy practiced by cycle rickshaw men along their circular labor migration circuits in North India. Their intimate interactions were not a single type, but were distinct, context-specific types produced across a range of places and vis-a-vis multiple types of female actors. Moreover, the men's intimate interactions were produced through the power/knowledge prisms of class, caste, and gender. This research should contribute to deeper understandings of the men's masculinity and sexuality as projects with a composite quality that includes the practice of intimate interactions with Delhi girls, sex workers, and wives. In their speech, the men themselves would blur distinctions between the types of relationships by calling one another's wives prostitutes, by jesting whether they should marry a woman passing on the street, or by speaking about going to a brothel to buy love. In practice, though, they ascribed separate values and meaning to their interactions with each type of woman. When anthropologists consider the entanglement of intimacy and commodity, the rickshaw men's case instructs that a worker may consume multiple types of intimate experiences, and each may support or affect his economic way of life in its own way. In terms of economic production, the practice of one type of intimacy had the potential to compliment or conflict with the practice of other types of intimacy

In his major contribution to the study of the relationships between Indian sexuality, masculinity, and capitalism, Srivastava theorizes the gendered condition of labor-class men who migrate from the countryside to the metropolis as "dislocated masculinity" (Srivastava 2007, 116-161). Men like these are engulfed by the city's "modernity" and struggle to reconcile it with the masculine values that they learned in their villages. They construct new sexualities for themselves by consuming from the mishmash of familiar and unfamiliar options presented to them in capitalism's urban vortex. Srivastava's analysis is incisive and, I believe, essentially correct about

the conditions and experiences of millions upon millions of Indian men. At the same time, my fieldwork strongly suggests that circular migrants like rickshaw men need to be disaggregated from this lot. Rickshaw men exhibit more of a “village-located masculinity” than a “dislocated masculinity,” and while a comparison in these terms contains some exaggeration, it is nonetheless suggestive of a meaningful distinction. It would be a mistake to take my analysis as a comment on the rickshaw men’s level of modernity. I do not find the concept of modernity or the categorization of cultures and cultural traits that it encourages helpful. Furthermore, I do not imply a culturally static model that could be summed up as, “you can take the rickshaw man out of the village, but you cannot take the village out of the rickshaw man.” Instead, I suggest that while rickshaw men understood themselves to be on a layover of sorts in the city, they did not experience an upheaval of their sexuality. They cultivated desires for new types of women in Delhi, and their interactions with women in Delhi were important while they were in Delhi and for the ways that they impacted the men’s labor, but they were also regarded as bounded, fleeting interactions that were as transient and casual as the men’s relationship with the city. On the other hand, throughout and beyond their migration circuits, the men maintained sexual desire for women who exhibited cultural styles associated with their villages. That desire was articulated resoundingly in some instances, more subtly in others, and sometimes it was subordinated to the men’s momentary lust for Delhi girls or sex workers who exhibited international or Western styles.

One difficulty with my analysis which will require further consideration is that village culture and village styles were not homogeneous or sealed off from the outside world. Villagers had TV, radio, and smart phones through which they gained exposure to urban and international styles; thanks to Facebook, memes, and Star Movie channel, rickshaw men under thirty years old had been consuming representations of women who exhibit international and Western styles long

before they first migrated to Delhi. Some of the men's wives had visited Kolkata, Delhi, or smaller regional cities. Today, more than ever, the separations between village and city culture can easily be overstated.

I have argued, though, that rickshaw men themselves recognized significant differences between the different types of women, and between the types of intimate interactions. The men attempted to exact adherence to conservative gender roles from their wives in their villages. As husbands, many of them attempted to live up to conservative, Brahmanical ideals even as they found it necessary to migrate away from their families for work. Those who bought sex and lusted over Delhi girls rationalized their actions as necessary or natural, and therefore forgivable, indiscretions in the context of what they experienced as lonely situations characterized by sexual deprivation. On the labor migration circuit, they did not stop aspiring to be manly and sexual beings; they in fact engaged in these projects with the passion and purposiveness to suggest that they were essential to, rather than accessory to, their laboring lives. Notably, their work would have been very different had it not been mediated through the practice of their intimate heterosexual relationships. Their desexualized labor performance resulted in no small part from their intimate interactions with Delhi girls; their work was done in stints that were made tolerable for some men with the help of their intimate interactions with sex workers; and their labor migration started and stopped with the practice of their relationships with their wives. Rickshaw pulling existed as it did through the practice and outcomes of these intimate relationships in which the men engaged according to a logic of male heterosexuality, and that is why it is impossible to understand the workers without understanding them as men.

4.0 Men-of-the-Village

On a chilly winter morning I began the workday by unlocking my rickshaw at the *thekedaar*'s garage and then pedaling the creaky cart through an unhealthy gray fog. Traffic was still light, but horns blasted intermittently to provide a kind of echolocation in the smog, and maybe to convey "Good morning!" I was eager to meet the rickshaw men, so I tried to speed up by pedaling harder. This backfired, however, when my foot slipped off its pedal and I fell forward onto the handlebars. My foot and leg were chewed up by the pavement and spinning pedals. The very low-speed crash must have appeared comical to anyone who happened to observe it — perhaps one of the rag-picking children who were always trudging along that part of the street, or possibly an early-bird Punjabi merchant, toothbrush dangling from his mouth as he spread a pitcher of water over the pavement in front of his shop to reduce the dust. My foot and leg were scraped and bloody. They looked bad, but I was not seriously injured. I pedaled my tattered ego away from the scene as quickly as my sore leg would allow.

A few rickshaw men were already at *Taakat Chawk* by the time I arrived. They began the day very early because they had regular customers like businesspeople or schoolchildren who relied on them for their morning commutes. The men gathered around when they discovered my bloody foot, and they gave what help they could; Akyaar poured out his water bottle on my leg to wash the small cuts and scrapes, then dabbed it dry with the piece of cloth that he kept in the basket that was fixed to the handlebars of his rickshaw; his brother, Aandhit, wagged his finger at me as he explained in a grave and vexed tone about the correct ways to pedal a rickshaw (slowly, in a relaxed manner); Kamal went off and returned with a plastic bag full of *chai* which he carefully poured into four tiny plastic cups, one for each man present. Hot *chai* is especially welcome on

winter mornings, and we sat together on the rickshaw savoring Kamal's small gift. Although I rushed away immediately after my accident, so embarrassed by an imaginary rag-picker's laughter, I now took pleasure in explaining the details of my crash to my workmates. We laughed about it together and it made me feel like more of a real rickshaw puller.

The *chai* was finished, and we crunched the tiny plastic cups in our hands and tossed them on the pavement. Aandhit paced up and down the row of parked rickshaws, and Akyaar beckoned to passing pedestrians: "Madam, rickshaw?" Kamal took out his water bottle and poured a few drops of water on each tire of his rickshaw, and then a small splash on the stem of his handlebars. Then he bowed his head and quietly muttered a few words as he touched his fingers to his forehead. I asked what the heck he was doing, and he told me that he had just asked Lord Shiva for more customers. Aandhit, whose rickshaw was queued in front of Kamal's, and Akyaar, who was parked behind Kamal, both snickered at the interest that I showed in Kamal's ritual. I was afraid that the Muslim brothers' amusement would somehow annoy Kamal, but luckily at that moment a passenger climbed into Akyaar's rickshaw, and Aandhit, too, got a pair of passengers and carried them off. Kamal and I were the only ones remaining.

"See," he said, "it's working."

"But you haven't gotten any passengers yet!" I argued.

To this he replied, "But my village-mates (*gaowale*) did."

4.1 Introduction

This chapter continues the task of understanding cycle rickshaw pullers as gendered subjects by examining the homo-social relationships that they carried on with other rickshaw men while they were in Delhi. By far, the most important of these relationships were those practiced

between rickshaw men who knew each other prior to coming to Delhi, and who came from the same village or from villages separated by short distances. The men usually referred to another cycle rickshaw puller from their villages as “my village-mate” (“*mera gaowala*” in Hindi, “*amar grambashi*” in Bangla), and so I will refer to the relationships between co-villagers that were practiced in Delhi as *gaowala* (village-mate) relationships. Bonds between cycle rickshaw pullers who did not share a common village of origin were more superficial, short-lasting, and impersonal. In contrast, the sociality between rickshaw pullers who were each other’s *gaowale* was richer and more durable, and often constituted the men’s only significant social life in Delhi. These relationships — practiced through the grammar of being a good man-of-the-village — supported them as vulnerable migrant workers and in their quests to be seen as proper breadwinners and male members of their village communities.

I identified the *gaowale* relationships as an important part of the men’s social worlds by following and observing their interactions, and by recording information about their social ties that they said was most meaningful to them. To recognize the meaning and rules of *gaowale* relationships, it was helpful to avoid, as far as possible, using preconceived categories such as “Hindu” or “proletariat” when collecting the ethnographic data. My approach, in this regard, is guided by Actor Network Theory which proceeds, “as if we were saying to the actors: ‘We won’t try to discipline you, to make you fit into our categories; we will let you deploy your own worlds, and only later will we ask you to explain how you came about settling them.’ The task of defining and ordering the social should be left to the actors themselves, not taken up by the analyst” (Latour 2005, 23). The following chapter attempts “to follow the actors themselves” (Latour 2005, 12) and treat, “the social not as a specific domain, a specific realm, or a particular sort of thing, but only as a very peculiar movement of re-association and reassembling” (Latour 2005, 7). Along the

migration circuit, each rickshaw man was enmeshed in an assemblage of *gaowala* relationships that would change as new village-mates periodically arrived in Delhi and others returned to their village. The bonding that they practiced challenged the popular belief that Hindu is to Muslim as oil is to water, and that caste boundaries are impervious. At *Taakat Chawk*, men of *Chamar* and *Mandal* castes, and men of Hindu and Muslim faith, were all equally welcome to wait for customers and join in the normal banter and timepass activities, so long as they were from the same cluster of villages in West Bengal. Their interactions regularly crossed caste and religious lines, although there were definite limits to inter-communal sociality, and I will illustrate these throughout the chapter.

Indian migrants are known to manifest solidarity across communal lines in Delhi (Ramaswami 2007; McDuie 2012), and abroad (Kathiravelu 2012, 107). And men who migrate from the Chinese countryside to work in the informal transportation industry in Chinese cities are known to make friends with people who do not share their ethnicity or place of origin, so long as they are of similar economic status (Zhang 2011, 154). For the rickshaw men, however, *gaowala* fraternity did not mean class solidarity. The men who I studied did not extend anywhere near the same level of support to cycle rickshaw pullers who were not from their village, let alone to random, unknown labor-class people in Delhi. Village-based solidarity provided protection against many difficulties that the men encountered as poor migrant laborers in Delhi. The practice of *gaowala* relationships was, according to my interlocutors, about being “good men” (*acche aadmi*) by being friendly and supportive to co-villagers, and at the heart of these relationships were homo-social bonding and mutual aid. This chapter’s focus on how my interlocutors related to one another as men contributes to an ongoing shift away from the great amount of academic literature that, “has a lot to say about relations between men but often as universal ungended subjects” (Jackson

2001, 7). It also contributes ethnographic evidence for the posited “existence across south Asia of [...] a rich world of satisfying relationships between same-sex kin and friends” (Osella and Osella 2006, 3).

Communities of solidarity among poor migrant workers in India arise through practice (De Neve 2005; Selvaraj 2014, 11), and after providing some background for the *gaowala* relationship in the next section, this chapter will examine five ways that the *gaowala* relationships were practiced: 1) competition over, and distribution of, customers; 2) sharing of, and treating to, everyday items like tobacco and tea; 3) humor and horseplay; 4) giving support in times of crisis; and 5) co-habitation in Delhi. This is not an exhaustive list of the ways that the relationships were practiced, but these practices in particular were heavily represented in the data that I managed to collect, and together they accounted for a large portion of the social interactions that the men engaged in while they were in Delhi. By practicing the *gaowala* relationship in these ways, the men exchanged support that was vital to the successful completion of their migration circuit, and for living up to the breadwinner role. These practices also helped them maintain or strengthen alliances between their own families and other rickshaw men’s families. Ties that were cultivated between families of the same caste could later be useful for fulfilling the key fatherly duty of arranging marriages for their children. There was, too, a subtle common sense that a man would simply not be well-liked by other men from his village if he failed to engage in the supportive practices described in this chapter. Being an *accha aadmi* required properly practicing *gaowale* relationships, and these practices were crucial to the men’s survival as migrant laborers.

4.2 Background

The concept of being village-mates was tinged with a bit of geographic flexibility so that anyone from a cluster of villages in the same region could be considered to inhabit the same expansive village. Ethnographic research from rural Bihar has found that, “local residents from a number of demographically different, neighboring villages shared, at times, a sense of identity based on their mutual association with a constellation of villages” (Gottschalk 2000, 42). In the villages where I conducted fieldwork, people of course recognized that they were one another’s village-mates, but the fact was unremarkable, and they did not usually bring it up. On a day-to-day basis, they instead used other labels and identities to relate to their co-villagers — e.g., “*Brahman*,” “Muslim,” “we people” (referring to communal in-groups), “those people” (referring to communal out-groups), “neighbor,” “friend,” “tea-vendor’s son,” etc. People who lived together in the village had shared interests, and men understood they needed to practice their relationships with their fellow villagers according to established norms. But, as has been noted for rural-urban migrants in Bangladesh, village identities become increasingly important to villagers when they migrate away from the village, because the identities may be drawn on to establish supportive relationships in the city where migrants are particularly vulnerable (Kuhn 2003, 322-26). For the rickshaw men, too, their shared village identity took on increased importance when they migrated to Delhi, and the ways that they related to one another as co-villagers were intensified (as in the cases of sharing, treating, and lending support during crises), or they created new ways of relating to one another as co-villagers that were specific to the needs of their situation as vulnerable migrants (as in the cases of cohabitation and equitably distributing their customers). Whereas calling someone one’s village-mate in the village could be a strategy for de-personalizing the relationship and increasing social distance, the men invariably evoked the *gaowala* bond between one another in Delhi to

signify social closeness and the masculine duty to participate in the set of supportive practices outlined in the following sections of this chapter.

Gaowala bonds were not based on abstract connections. Solidarity between rickshaw men based on their place of origin could resemble, from the outside, the “mini-Bihar” and “mini-Orisa” worker communities found at jute factories near Kolkata (Fernandes 1997, 117). And occasionally, the men who I studied referred to themselves as Biharis or Bengalis (but this was usually done to differentiate themselves from permanent residents of Delhi). Their shared Bangali-ness, though, was the most abstract and superficial of the many ways that they were tied to one another. In her study of cycle rickshaw men in South Delhi, Chakroborty (2013) points out much the same distinction between an abstract identity “in relation to a place of fixity, an idea of ‘home’” (28), and an identity in relation to “much more tangible physical places of origin” (28). She writes, “These places (villages) moreover, play an active role in [cycle rickshaw pullers’] migration and livelihoods and continue to dictate social relations in the destination of migration” (28). Arguing that, “village based communities take precedence...in the city” (32), she quotes a cycle rickshaw man in Delhi who stated, “We don’t have unity here...Among people from the same village, yes, but not among people from the different villages” (32).

Beyond ethnicity, and even beyond religion and shared language, what mattered to rickshaw men was pre-established trust, kin obligations, common friends, common personal histories, and mutual interests in the village. The men who regularly worked together at the chaotic *Taakat Chawk* knew one another’s wives, children, and parents, and grew up together attending the same schools, weekly markets, weddings, and funerals. As has been the case for cycle rickshaw pullers in other historical contexts (see Warren 1986), the close bonds that my interlocutors maintained with their workmates were often kin-based. Many were next-door neighbors in the

village, and they often shared an assumed albeit somewhat unclear blood or marriage relationship, if not a known and readily explicable family relationship.²⁷

Once in a while, the *gaowala* label could be applied fictively, similar to how North Indian kin terms may be applied fictively to non-kin members (Vatuk 1982). In such cases, *gaowala* relationships were based on an imagined and shared village of origin. For example, I knew a man from the state of Assam who became close friends with the Bengalis at *Taakat Chawk* only after he arrived in Delhi, and the Bengalis referred to him as “our village-mate” (*humere gaowala*). This is in line with other scholarship on cycle rickshaw pullers in South Delhi that finds the closer rickshaw pullers are, the more they tend to identify as one another’s village-mates (Chakraborty 2013), and also with scholarship that shows that Indian migrants may strategically don certain identities as they circulate throughout a region (Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003). Most of the time, however, *gaowala* relationships were based on trust and personal connections that took a lifetime to establish, and for this reason it was uncommon for the title to be applied fictively.

Some of my key interlocutors did, from time to time, cultivate friendships and alliances in Delhi with cycle rickshaw pullers and other types of people who were not from their village. They interacted with a variety of people every day in Delhi including customers, *thekedaars*, passers-by, and many other types of informal laborers and vendors. They did not, however, thrive on the “cosmopolitan neighborliness” that settlers to Delhi’s poor neighborhoods are known to practice (Datta 2012, 747). It has been shown that spaces in which informal street economies unfold can contain latent networks and dormant potential for solidarity between actors who occupy the same space but who are unknown to one another (Bayat 1997; Di Nunzio 2012, 437). As a rule, however,

²⁷ When two men shared a known and relatively close kinship tie, they would refer to each other using kinship terms. For example, Aandhit and Akyaar, who were siblings, referred to each other as “my brother” (*mera bhaai*) instead of “my village-mate.” In these cases, all the rules of the *gaowala* relationship still applied, and then some.

the rickshaw men who I studied showed indifference or even aversion towards forming close relationships with people who were unknown to them prior to coming to Delhi. The temporary nature of their stay in the city where they work is known to discourage migrant cycle rickshaw pullers from joining formal support-providing institutions there (Lyons 2007, 380-381), and this was probably a factor for the rickshaw men in South Delhi who were determined to return and settle down in their villages. They reported that they were not interested in pursuing close friendships in Delhi, and they believed that many Delhi-ites harbor prejudice against laborer-class migrants. Furthermore, they made many distrustful remarks about unknown people, even their labor-class neighbors in the settlements in which they stayed in Delhi.

Even more than distrust or an inability to connect with strangers, my impression was that the men were rather preoccupied with their relationships with their village-mates in Delhi, and with their plans and relationships back home. Most of the men had longstanding acquaintanceships, friendships, or kinships with each other, and in Delhi they pedaled alongside each other in the exclusively male job of rickshaw pulling. They had similar worries about not being able to send enough financial support home, and they all experienced separation from the same village and the same villagers. Their co-villager identities became salient when they had nothing but each other in Delhi, and being co-villagers in Delhi meant nothing if not that they supported and held one another accountable in their endeavors to be, or be perceived as, good men.

4.3 Competition and Cooperation

This section explores the cooperation and competition that rickshaw men enact at work. My discussion is mainly limited to competition and cooperation surrounding the distribution of

customers. The focus is on the interactions and expectations between rickshaw men who worked together and regarded one another as village-mates. Less attention is paid to interactions between rickshaw pullers who were not village-mates. Interactions of the latter type were characterized by minimal cooperation and less easy-going attitudes when one man perceived that another had stolen his customer. By and large, however, cycle rickshaw pullers waited for customers with their *gaowale* and so problems and confrontations between rickshaw men who did not share a village connection occurred infrequently. Among *gaowale*, on the other hand, confrontation and cooperation were the norms and although, “village solidarity always carries the germs of division” (Gottschalk 2000, 50), their squabbles were tempered with care and respect for each other and their mutual long-term masculine and economic projects.²⁸

Some rickshaw pullers regularly waited in queues near the exits of the metro station. Men in the queues tended to cluster by village affiliation, although any individual queue tended to be less homogeneous to a particular village identity than did the groups of rickshaw pullers who worked from certain street corners. I believe this was because the metro station was a busy drop-off point for cycle rickshaw pullers coming from all around the neighborhood, and many of them would queue up at the metro station at whichever entrance they had dropped their passenger in order to maximize their productivity and avoid pedaling away with an empty rickshaw. Nevertheless, most of the metro station queues were still largely segregated by village and the type of interactions that I describe in the remainder of this section were found there if only to a lesser degree than at the street corners.

²⁸ For a more rational-actor account of relationships between cycle rickshaw pullers who work together see Fung (2005, 31-35).

At the metro station, rickshaw men formed queues so that, in theory, the longer each man waited, the closer he moved to the most desirable point for meeting customers which was directly in front of the stairs from which metro riders exited the station. There were four different staircases and an elevator leading out of the station, and in total there were about seven places in which different groups of cycle rickshaw pullers queued to wait for passengers beneath the large, busy station. As the men waiting in the front of the queue snatched up fares and pedaled off, the men waiting behind them advanced their rickshaws into the prime positions and began trying to attract the next wave of people exiting the metro. It got complicated when sometimes multiple queues of rickshaw men that stretched in more than one direction converged to greet potential customers at a single exit. Rickshaw men dropping off passengers would frequently pedal right to the front of the queues to deliver their passenger as close as possible to the metro entrance, and they would then sometimes “steal” from the men in the queue a new customer who was exiting the metro at that moment. Men who fell asleep in the queue or walked away from their rickshaw risked losing their places. On top of this, customers might have been dissatisfied for whatever reason with the men at the front of the queue, or they might not have understood that the men were working from a queue and would walk to the back of the queue to hire their ride. All of this is to say that despite best intentions, queues at the metro presented some disorder and ambiguity on the issue of how customers would be distributed. Ambiguities in the queuing system led to disputes between rickshaw pullers but, give or take a couple line-jumping co-workers, a rickshaw man was basically guaranteed that eventually he would have his turn to meet customers from the premium place in front of the metro exit.

At intersections around the neighborhood, too, rickshaw men would wait for a turn to sit in the most desirable spots for attracting customers. Unlike the metro where the best spots were

clearly in front of the exits, it was sometimes less clear at the intersections where the best spot was; some men felt they had the most luck finding customers right on the corner, and others preferred to sit twenty meters down one street away from the corner. At *Taakat Chawk* there were a couple spots available on one side of the street but there was no room for queuing because the remaining space was taken up by street vendors. These spots were therefore understood by rickshaw pullers as first come, first serve spots. On the opposite side there was more space and men queued down both streets and their lines met at the corner spot which was thought to be the most visible for customers. Sometimes the men quarreled over who was allowed to move into the desired spot, but such arguments were often nullified when a motor vehicle would pull up and its driver would honk and shout threats until the rickshaw men all moved their queue so that he could park or squeeze by on the congested street. In these cases, the queue would reform whenever space became available. While the queuing system at the intersection was even less well-defined than at the metro, the men at the intersection were usually all of a single village so, for example, they could trust one another more to keep an eye on their rickshaws and advance them in the queue if they stepped away for a few minutes.

Much has been written about the moral economies that poor people create for themselves (e.g., Scott 1976; Matsumura 2006; Bourgois and Schonberg 2009), and in North India poor male workers of a single industry are known to redistribute their earnings among themselves to establish a safety net and equality of outcome in earnings (Doron 2013). The cycle rickshaw pullers did not systematically redistribute their individual incomes among themselves although during crises they would sometimes provide financial support to one another. My interlocutors were all clear that earnings-wise it was every man for himself. Therefore, it would be inaccurate to say that their informal systems of distributing customers amounted to a moral economy in the sense that it was

engineered to use collective economic resources to keep any single man from financial ruin. Instead, the men took rough collective measures through their use of a queuing system to ensure that there was equality of opportunity for earnings. This approach resembled the *rota* system, or “roulette economy,” that priests use to take turns officiating funerals in Banaras, India (Parry 1994). There was no guarantee that a rickshaw puller would get a generous customer when he waited in the queue, but at least he had the same chance as the rest of his village-mates. I think it is safe to say that one of the reasons that they preferred an equality-of-opportunity approach instead of an equality-of-outcome approach was that it provided a measure of support for their breadwinner missions while it avoided creating a situation where they had to admit that any of their remittances were the direct result of anything less than their individual hard work.

The rickshaw men’s bank accounts and their masculinity depended on getting enough well-paying customers. Despite this, their competition over customers was conducted delicately, moderated not just by their sympathy for one another’s masculine reputations and economic success, but by their mutual interest in seeing one another succeed in these things. Most rickshaw men claimed that they did not argue over customers with their workmates because they were from the same village. I observed that they did indeed argue quite a bit over customers with their co-villagers, however they took care to diffuse the arguments and not let them get out of control. I asked one of the rickshaw men, “How is your relationship with [your *gaowale*]?” and he explained, “It’s alright, we work together. Sometimes we argue, but then later we talk, no problem. Some of them like to argue, some of them don’t. When we argue we won’t leave them for good, we will meet them later.” I questioned him further, “Is there competition [used the English word] between rickshaw men?” He understood the English word ‘competition’ and replied,

Everyone wants that they can carry their own passengers. ‘I’ll take them, I’ll earn well,’ they think. There’s no rule, just that those in front of the line should be given

the first customers. But the customer comes to the first two or three rickshaw pullers, the first one will demand 30 rupees, the next one will say 20 and take the customer. Then they will argue: ‘Why are you cutting me in line!’ There is no union [used the English word, union]. But there is a connection of the heart (*dil ki sambandh*) between *gaowale*.

I asked him to tell me more about this connection between *gaowale*, and he continued, “My village-mates all meet each other [in Delhi], and we don’t want to fight. Sometimes if one takes another’s passenger, he will let it go, but sometimes fights happen, always about passengers.” “Between Muslims?” I asked my interviewee because I knew he was Muslim. “Whether they’re Hindu, Muslim, no matter. Here they are all equal (*baraabar*).” I remember once when a gaunt old rickshaw puller whose thick veins and bones bulged through his sweaty skin got angry at a younger rickshaw puller who had just swooped in front of the queue and ushered an on-coming customer into his rickshaw. The old man grumbled loudly, “You sister fucker, what are you doing? I’ve been waiting here for a long time!” The young guy rode off with the customer, without a major confrontation. I asked what that was all about, and the old man sighed, “He’s my *gaowala*, how can we fight?”

Over time, scuffles over space also came into focus. The guy in the desirable space would pedal off when he got a passenger, then the guy behind him in line would start to move forward into the vacant space. But then someone else would arrive to contest the space – usually they would try to swoop in from a less desirable space across the street, or they would come from another queue that was also converging on the empty spot. Akyaar the Muslim and Kamal the Hindu made a game out of getting to the best space at *Taakat Chawk* by keeping an eye on when it became vacant and racing one another to it. It was comical to watch them hustle across the street for something that was seemingly very low stakes. The men were smiling and laughing even as they

cursed one another and argued for the spot. The nonsense escalated and they rammed their carts into one another, trying to push each other out of the spot. Their behavior seemed to mock reality and supports scholarship that finds humor and competing between Indian men can serve to diffuse or at least make ambiguous social hierarchy (Nisbett 2007). It also reminded me of Srinivas's classic study of village relationships in India when he, "wondered sometimes whether the disputes which occurred frequently were not a source of recreation for the villagers who saw in them welcome departures from the boredom of daily routine" (Srinivas 1976, 312).

Usually, it was a non-issue when two rickshaw men attempted to occupy the same space; with a quick glance they grasped the needs of the situation, one of them would just back out and go elsewhere without contesting. One of them might make a plain, informative comment like, "I've been waiting in line here for a while," and then the other guy would concede without incident. If they were both more serious about wanting the space, then an argument would happen, and it could become ugly with yelling and appeals to their workmates as witnesses. I remember once when Sunil and Hosein went for the same space. Sunil backed into the space, and Hosein pulled forward into it. Sunil sort of reached first, and Hosein saw this and rammed his rickshaw into Sunil's rickshaw. Sunil growled, "C'mon, what are you doing?" Hosein complained, "Motherfucker, I was in line here waiting!" With an animated expression Sunil declared, "I've been waiting for half an hour here, and no passengers have come." Kamal was called upon to verify this and grunted that it was true. Hosein retorted, "I don't care, I was coming for that spot," but Sunil spat, "Motherfucker, just wait, you just had some customers." Hosein went across the street and complained to Akyaar. Two minutes later Sunil carried off a customer, and then Hosein moved into the space and two minutes later himself carried off a customer. In the middle of their argument, I had asked what one of the names that they had called each other meant and they both laughed.

Among *gaowale*, confrontations like these involved profanity-laden negotiations, but were colored with an overall tone of care not to destroy the relationship. Although they raised their voices, the exchange involved more cajoling than fighting. Sunil and Hosein's lives are tied together in many ways — e.g., their wives are good friends and often watch one another's children — so it is in each of their interests that the other successfully completes the labor migration circuit.

Between *gaowale*, cooperation in distributing customers was far more common than fights that got out of hand. As is the case among rickshaw pullers elsewhere (Lyons 2007, 381-382), close friendships among *gaowale* were the basis for cooperating on split trips where a party of customers that was too big for one rickshaw was divided between two or more rickshaw pullers who transported them in a caravan. As I conducted my first split trip with Aandhit, I felt so much safer to be following another cycle rickshaw puller who I knew could potentially help me in the event of a road accident, a conflict with a motorist, or a dispute with the customers. *Gaowale* would regularly cooperate across caste and religious lines to conduct split trips. And when they were more interested in empty labor than taking fares, they would direct inquiring customers to certain of their *gaowale*, not on the basis of communal identity, but on the basis of their knowledge that their friend might have wanted a fare at that moment or that he might have needed to head in the direction that the customer wanted to travel.

Conflicts over space and customers between rickshaw pullers who were not well known to one another did not happen often. When they did occur, they were conducted in more serious tones, and there was less room for negotiations. I was sitting in the queue with Panchim when he saw an unknown rickshaw puller off on the side of the queue and it seemed as if the stranger was rolling closer to try to scoop up a customer without waiting in the queue. Panchim said in an aggressive tone which I had never before heard him use, "Are you looking for passengers?" implying that if

so, he could not do it that way. The two rickshaw pullers silently sized each other up for a second and then the stranger just pedaled away. With dramatic annoyance, Panchim moaned, “These guys are crazy, they won’t just take a number and get in line.” I had to hide a smile because there have been plenty of times when I saw Panchim himself jump the queue. But many of those times were when he was at *Taakat Chawk*, and the turn-taking system, while still providing some practical benefit and hassle-reduction, is not as crucial if one is among his *gaowale*. The *gaowale* relationship implied room for negotiation as well as solidarity that ran deeper than arguments about curb space and customer distribution. For this reason, I was not surprised to see Sunil and Hosein share a friendly cup of tea the very next day after their argument.

4.4 Treating and Sharing

This section examines *gaowala* relationships through the practices of sharing and treating one another to common and relatively inexpensive items for consumption like water, tea, alcohol, snacks, chewing tobacco, and *bidi* (local-made, leaf-wrapped cigarettes).²⁹ The consumption of some of these items was referred to by the men as “timepass” or a “hobby” (*shaawk*), and the exchange and shared consumption of these items was the stuff of friendship and solidarity. I use “treating” in the sense in which someone might buy a round of drinks for their friends, thereby individually taking on the cost for the items to be consumed by them and their friends. And I use

²⁹ They also shared many other things, such as mobile phones, clothes, rickshaws, sex workers, and information. Some of these are covered in other sections of this chapter (e.g., information sharing is described in this chapter’s section on support during crises), and some of them are touched on in other areas of this dissertation (e.g., see the previous chapter’s description of sharing a brothel experience). Also, the men supported one another in the procurement and preparation of their main meals (as distinct from snacks), but this type of support was not usually given through sharing or treating, and I discuss it a bit in this chapter’s section on their cohabitation.

“sharing” in a way that does not always or automatically imply a debt being created between giver and receiver. There is quite a bit of anthropological work on sharing, and the best recent work critiques and complicates exchange models enshrined in the works of Marcell Mauss (1954) and Bronislaw Malinowski (1922). Sharing can mean dividing and giving access to a resource, and there need not be an expectation for repayment (see Elder-Vass 2015). Although people who are committed to understanding humans as rational actors always find a way to see any sharing of resources as a system of credit and debt creation, ethnographic scrutiny makes it hard in various cases for this view to hold water, especially if we are talking about the water that rickshaw men obtained for free from public taps and then passed around to their workmates when it got hot out. Sharing in the sense explored below tends to resemble less the exchange model that is intent on identifying rules of reciprocity, and more a mutual aid model based on caring and freely giving.

Cycle rickshaw pullers espoused the door-step opinion that it was every rickshaw man for himself, and this is consistent with Srinivas’s (1976) observation that Indian villagers, “were taught to be petty capitalists from a tiny age” (98). One of my interviewees declared, “For how many rickshaw pullers there are, for each one he has his own earnings, his own children, his own wife, his own expenses for his home in the village. Nothing is shared between us. We have no duty towards one another.” Despite his initial response, he modified his position as the interview continued. I asked, “What help happens between cycle rickshaw pullers?” “None,” he said, “Cycle rickshaw pullers do not help one another.” I ventured, “But it seems to me that sometimes when they are from the same place that...,” and before I finished the thought he interrupted and stated, “When there is a personal relationship [used the English phrase, personal relationship].” “A personal relationship?” I repeated, and he explained without hesitation that, “When they are relatives, when they are *gaowale*, then they can help one another. If I have food, I will ask him to

eat with me. I will buy him tea. I'll ask him to sit with me and relax with me. This happens. Besides this, cycle rickshaw pullers don't help anyone." Individualism and self-sufficiency were valued, as this rickshaw man let on, but so were support for co-villagers. Srinivas further noted that having a common village identity may be enough to evoke a sense of obligation which can "lay at the root of socialization" (Srinivas 1976, 288).

The day after Sunil and Hosein had their blow-up over a parking space, I found them sitting together in Sunil's rickshaw. They chatted about the price of train tickets and the upcoming wedding of Sunil's daughter. A tea vendor passed and Hosein stopped him and bought tea for himself and Sunil which the vendor poured from a thermos into two tiny paper cups that he placed on the seat of the rickshaw. The men hung out together, sipping the hot tea. Witnessing this confirmed the idea that communities of solidarity among poor migrant workers in India arise through, "the togetherness produced by doing everyday activities jointly" (Selvaraj 2014, 11). It is likely that these "informal processes of collectivisation" (Selvaraj 2014, 2) are bolstered by the widely held belief in rural West Bengal that connectedness between people is, "formed through the everyday activities of sharing food, touching, sleeping in the same bed, having sexual relations, exchanging words, and living in the same home, in the same neighborhood, or on the same village soil" (Lamb 2000, 28). The mixing and sharing of everyday items between people is a key part of this belief (Lamb 2000, 36-37), and my interlocutors shared many items such as drinking water with their *gaowala* workmates, especially when they had just filled their bottles with cool water from a free public tap a few blocks from *Taakat Chawk*. The men casually helped themselves to one another's water bottles, holding the bottles above their faces and pouring the water into their mouths without touching their lips to the bottles. Sometimes the exchange was not initiated by the owner of the bottle offering his friend a drink, but by the thirsty friend enacting his rights of use

over the resource by taking his friend's bottle without asking and guzzling even until it was empty. When a rickshaw man had them, soft drinks and small snacks were sometimes similarly treated as communal property among his workmates. Once there was a religious parade that passed by *Taakat Chawk*, and from one of the floats free bananas were distributed. Aandhit got a banana and ate it, then he kept following the float and jostling through the large crowd that was congregating around it for more free fruit. He fought his way through the crowd and took a couple more bananas which he then carried back and gave to his workmates. Then there was the time when a couple rickshaw men from *Taakat Chawk* helped push a broken-down jeep until the driver was able to pop-start it, and the driver gave them ten rupees. They bought tea with the ten rupees and shared it with another *gaowala* and me even though we had not helped push the jeep. Drinking tea together and sharing snacks between castes and religious communities can be viewed as a spiritually polluting activity, but between *gaowale* in Delhi there was very little abstention from such sharing across communal lines.

Most rickshaw men habitually consumed chewing tobacco, *gutka* (a mixture of tobacco and other ingredients), and *bidi* (Indian brand, leaf-rolled cigarettes), and the sharing of these items was integral to their daily rhythms. As was possible with the sharing of water, tea, or snacks, sharing tobacco could transgress caste rules mainly because of the method of sharing. Saliva is considered a spiritually polluting substance so, “the passing of cigarettes from one mouth to another among [members of different communal groups] signals a suspension of caste ideals of pollution” (Jeffrey 2010, 94). Those who ignored caste ideals like this in Delhi tended to adjust their behavior to meet orthodox expectations when they returned to the village. Chewing tobacco was more popular than smoking *bidi*, and some men chalked this up to the fact that they experienced no problems taxiing customers with a cheek full of tobacco whereas customers might

become annoyed by the smoke from a *bidi*. Chewing tobacco was prepared by rubbing lime paste into the tobacco in the palm of the hand. Sharing prepared tobacco from hand to hand between members of different castes compromised caste purity while establishing a cross-caste bond. In spaces shared by South Asian migrants from different communal and ethnic backgrounds, gifting, borrowing, and exchange constitute the “labor of producing peace” (Ring 2006). The men’s sharing practices revealed a level of disregard for some important rules governing communal segregation, and the transgressions that took place produced a level of solidarity between them. However, the limits of village solidarity were laid bare when, for example, one of the Muslim men would not accept chewing tobacco that his Hindu village-mate had just prepared by hand. This did not stop the sharing though; it merely necessitated an adjustment in its method. In this case, the borrower would help himself to his friend’s pouch of tobacco and prepare it himself instead of accepting a prepared wad from his friend’s hand.

Some rickshaw men drank alcohol, and when they drank it in Delhi they usually did so in their rented rooms with their *gaowale*.³⁰ Alcohol consumption is a complicated topic studied from a variety of angles, and its consumption in India can have multiple meanings (Doron 2011). The men gave many explanations for why they drank including to forget their loneliness, to dull their emotional and physical pains, to increase their physical strength, to help them sleep, to celebrate and relax, and so on. In the village, drinking is a highly gendered activity that is only appropriate for men. When the men who I studied drank together, they knew they were participating in an activity in which they would not allow their wives or daughters to participate. What I observed

³⁰ Although sharing alcohol could enhance the *gaowala* relationships, many of the rickshaw men, especially the Muslims who practiced their faith strictly, did not drink alcohol. Their abstention did not tarnish their *gaowala* relationships. They simply practiced the relationships in the other ways described in this chapter, and their fellow villagers accepted their avoidance of alcohol as a matter of choice.

generally affirmed other researchers' findings that drinking among North Indian men of lower castes and classes can enhance their friendship and be an act of masculine bonding (Nisbett 2007, 945; Doron 2011, 102; Kathiravelu 2012, 110). Sometimes one or two men would buy a bottle and share it among a roomful of men, but more commonly the cost of it was divided evenly among all the drinkers. The drinking itself was a very pragmatic operation wherein the harsh domestic-label liquor was measured into cups, sometimes cut with water, and quickly chugged with the same resolution one musters to endure a beating. Panchim and his *gaowale* with whom he shared a room would sometimes drink during and after their nightly meal, and they would sit in their underwear against the brick walls of the small room in the final intoxicated half hour before sleep. They would listen to each other's stories and thoughts about their past travels and jobs, and they were prone to giving dramatic accounts to no one in particular of their efforts, earnings, mistreatment, and triumphs as employees at a number of other jobs that they had held in their village and on labor gangs around the country. Drinking inspired the men to swap stories that revolved around them being honest, clever, and striving to be good workers, good earners, good fathers, and good family men.

Some rickshaw men articulated a connection between treating and sharing, and ideal manhood. When I asked Panchim, "How does a man in your village make a good name (*accha naam banaana*) for himself?" he told me that, "He does good work, he gives freely, (*daan de dete*), after a while, the whole village will say that he's a great man. When there are some friends, he will give five rupees, two or four men go drinking, he gives a hundred rupees, now he's a very good man!" "And those men who come to Delhi to pull a rickshaw..." I began to ask, and Panchim interjected, scoffing "Delhi is a worthless place (*bekar desh*)!" "...what can they do?" I asked. "We sit together for timepass, for friendship, drink liquor, talk." Other villagers including the

rickshaw pullers' wives also understood that there was a way in which men from the village are expected to relate to one another, especially in times of difficulty. Panchim's statement was corroborated by Aandhit's wife, Aasmina. She said that there were little responsibilities between all men in the village, not just between a man and his family. Many of the responsibilities that she listed sounded to me like general good-will acts such as helping one another with rides or helping when someone gets sick or hurt, and she also specifically mentioned that treating to tea and sharing tobacco or snacks is expected when men cross paths in the village. Moderate generosity is expected and supposed to enhance some Indian men's masculinity at certain life stages (Osella and Osella 2000), and young men are thought to create "a cultural substratum of male solidarity" by hanging around tea stalls and street corners in North India and sharing tobacco and tea (Jeffrey 2010, 94). The rickshaw men knew that to be regarded as good men they needed to treat and share with their *gaowale* everyday items like booze, tea, tobacco, snacks, and water, and these practices not only bolstered their masculinity, but also supplied support and comfort on the migration circuit where such things could be hard to find.

The rules of proper *gaowala* manhood did not negate the fact that the men were individuals, and they practiced, bent, or disregarded the rules as they saw fit, and as their addictions compelled them. After a long interview with Panchim, I bought him a big bottle of beer. We walked around the corner from the beer store and into an alley where a few of his *gaowale* who themselves seemed to be a little drunk were relaxing on a broken-down rickshaw. They exchanged greetings and Panchim set his unopened beer on the rickshaw while he urinated against a wall. The other men seemed interested in the beer and asked where he got it, to which he told them he had just bought it around the corner. Panchim relieved himself and then picked up his unopened bottle of beer. As he and I walked away I asked, "Aren't you going to share this beer with those guys?" He replied, "No! This isn't even enough for me!"

4.5 Humor and Horseplay

Humor, teasing, and horseplay — “*mazaak*” (humor) as the men called it — were in the very fiber of *gaowala* relationships. In the previous chapter, I discussed how men found entertainment in sexualizing women and how it related to rickshaw men’s intimate interactions with women. Sexist jokes were certainly a type of masculine bonding, but in this section I will focus on other popular types of humor. All rickshaw men, young and old, participated in a great deal of humor, teasing, and horseplay, and I pay special attention here to that which was practiced between co-villagers because my fieldwork revealed that it occurred much more frequently, and it had a more personal quality, than humor between men who did not share the *gaowala* relationship. Teasing at *Taakat Chawk* was dished intra- and inter-communally and, as I will explain, inter-communal barbs were of a distinct genre. Humor is known to strengthen the ties between workmates elsewhere in India (De Neve 2005), and between rickshaw men it served to solidify their relationships, cut tensions, and provide relief from boredom at work.

Boredom loomed over workdays the way toxic air hangs over Delhi. When waiting for customers, spitting on the street, and meditating to the sounds of traffic horns failed to inspire, cycle rickshaw pullers turned to horseplay. Impromptu and lively horseplay peppered every workday. Wrestling and play fighting were popular, and water fights, sabotaging one another’s rickshaws, and wild dances were also par for the course. Play fighting could be instigated by a joking-insult or a friendly dispute over a parking space. It was not uncommon for the physical sparring to continue for several minutes, sometimes escalating to full-blown wrestling matches that could include more than two men and would attract a group of cheering and jeering workmates. In addition to strengthening *gaowala* bonds and killing time, wrestling matches and play fighting allowed the men to show off their physical strength and toughness. Play fighting and

wrestling also provided a distraction from their demoralizing work in which they often needed to efface their masculinity (see Chapter Three), and it allowed them to collectively redirect their attention to a more manly image of themselves.

Their play seemed very aggressive to me when I began my fieldwork, but eventually I could not help but laugh along with the rest of the men. I remember when Hosein stole Sunil's sandals while he was napping and threw them in the middle of the busy street. Sunil shouted all the abuses and curses he could think of while he dodged traffic to recover his footwear. In the meantime, Hosein snatched a towel that was tied to Sunil's rickshaw and tossed it into oncoming traffic just as Sunil returned with the sandals. Poor Sunil made the mistake of setting the sandals down on his rickshaw before he hurried back into the river of blaring horns to save his towel, and Hosein did what any proper *gaowala* would do and hurled them a second time into the street just as Sunil, having regained possession of his now filthy towel, was marching towards his friend for revenge. "Bastard, sister fucker!" he yelled as he chased his slippers around once more in the screeching traffic.

Another favorite type of horseplay was throwing an empty plastic bottle or piece of trash from across the intersection at a daydreaming or napping workmate. No one was spared, and a direct hit would usually lead to a wrestling match. In addition to harassing one another by throwing bottles and garbage, they also found endless humor in dumping water on an unwary workmate. About one hundred meters from *Taakat Chawk* there was a tree beneath which the men would sometimes nap during the workday. But they also knew that this made them vulnerable to water attacks. Kamal preferred to pedal to more secluded napping spots out of fear of being doused.

As I gained rapport with the men, they incorporated me into their horseplay. There was the classic rock-on-the-backseat-of-the-rickshaw: as I sat on the front seat of my rickshaw talking to

someone or just waiting for customers, someone would stealthily place a big rock on the backseat of my rickshaw. The punchline was just that it appeared silly, and for a potential customer it made my rickshaw look dirty and made me sound absurd when I asked them to have a seat. The second time it happened, when I discovered the small boulder resting right where I had been inviting potential customers to sit, I jumped down from my rickshaw and playfully attacked the nearest suspect, slapping him on the back and strangling him. The men loved seeing me participate in their horseplay, and from then on they started to give me little bits of advice; “wait for customers here, not there,” “be patient,” “don’t carry customers to that neighborhood,” and so on. Another type of prank they loved was to grab and slow down each other’s carts as they pedaled past. A number of times I thought my rickshaw was broken when I was pedaling for all I was worth but barely moving. Then I would turn around just in time to see a rickshaw man who I knew let go of the frame of my rickshaw and pretend as if he were busy with something else. Alternately, the prankster would clutch a low bar in the rear of my cart and kneel down so that even when I turned around I did not see him. These jokes never got old for the rickshaw men.

Gaowale tended to know one another intimately, and this meant that they were able to personally tailor their teasing. Kamal’s brother-in-law came to *Taakat Chawk* to pull a rickshaw for a couple months, and one day as I sat with him, he was in a good mood and he began making fun of Kamal who was waiting for customers across the street. The skinny young man mocked Kamal for having a weird twitch that caused him to squeeze his eyes closed and then tilt his head to one side and rub his shoulder with his ear. He said, “Watch, he’ll do it now, just watch.” And so we watched Kamal from across the street and sure enough he did the twitch as if on cue. This kind of teasing did not seem mean-spirited, and what stood out was how well the workers knew one another. It is believed that joking between rural-urban migrants in Delhi can indicate that their

minds and cares are on their village and their relationships there (Ramswami 2006, 221), and some of the men's humor drew from their shared knowledge about the village. Whereas other rickshaw men would attempt to attract customers by yelling out the names of destinations in the South Delhi neighborhood to which they would be willing to pedal, Kamal used to crow the names of places near their village in West Bengal. It made no sense to people passing by, but his *gaowale* would double over with laughter at the absurdity of it.

Religious slurs were also used to rile fellow *gaowale*. I was hanging out at a juice stall with Laxmi and Manoj who are both Hindus. I knew that they were living together in Delhi, and I asked who else they live with. They said the names of two other Hindu men from their village, and then Laxmi mentioned that they were also living with Aandhit who is Muslim and who was not present at that moment for our conversation. Manoj made a sign to refer to the Muslim man's circumcision by chopping with one hand at a finger on his other hand, and they both laughed. I played dumb and asked what it meant, and they said, "It means he's Muslim." At that moment Hosein, who is also a Muslim, pedaled up and parked a few feet behind us, and my Hindu companions started pointing and saying, "*Katua!* (a derogatory term for Muslim men referring to their circumcisions, and literally meaning "cut one")." They suggested that I go and greet Hosein by saying, "Hello *katua*." I went over to Hosein but did not say anything. Manoj pulled away with a customer, and a minute later Laxmi sauntered over to us and pointing to Hosein he said quite loudly to me so that Hosein could hear, "He's *katua*." Laxmi punched Hosein on the leg and Hosein did his best to ignore his sneering workmate. I said with some surprise, "Can he call you that? Is that okay?" Hosein answered casually, "Yeah, he's my *gaowala*."

Later, Manoj had this to say: "We don't joke about communal group (*jaati*). Like I'm Hindu or Muslim, none of these things we joke about. Because whatever group, we're all brothers.

We never say, ‘You’re Muslim, I won’t talk to you.’ We never say, ‘You’re Hindu, I can’t talk to you.’ There’s whatever group there, Hindu and Muslims, so we don’t make fun of group. Because if we make fun of group then they’ll get angry.” Perplexed, I asked, “Yeah, but what about when we were by the juice-seller and Laxmi pointed to Hosein and said ‘He’s *katua*’”? Manoj’s answer was, “Yes, we can make these jokes, among those people with whom we have more friendship, among our *gaowale*. I can say it to Hosein, I can say it to Aandhit, and they don’t get mad.” The use of the *katua* slur has been documented among poor migrant factory workers in Delhi where they make fun of one another’s religious backgrounds to pass the time, and in doing so possibilities for cross-group solidarity are created. In the context of working closely together and sharing the struggle of earning a living and enduring factory drudgery, the slur becomes a way to explore the unfamiliar, and a sort of entertainment even for Muslims (Ramaswami 2007). It is as if humor among the poor migrant men on the shop floor thrives on difference so that the men have more ammunition and varieties of slurs to hurl upon one another (Ramaswami 2012, 120). At the street corner something similar happened when Muslim rickshaw men taunted their Hindu co-villagers by calling them “*hindu-dandu*” and Hindus reciprocated by jibing, “*katua*.” This sort of cross-communal teasing consolidated village identity, if for no other reason, then because the horrible slurs would likely instantly provoke a fist fight if they were directed to anyone besides one’s *gaowale*.

The men satirized their lives and differences in order to share a laugh. For example, Manoj, who drinks alcohol, was goofing around and imploring Akyaar, who does not drink, to pedal him to the liquor store. Akyaar kept refusing, solemnly shaking his head, saying that he does not drink, and that drinking is bad. I see their play as mocking real life through enacting exaggerated caricatures of themselves. It is hard to say whether the purpose of their play was to ease simmering

tensions, or if it was more to demonstrate through their shared laughter that their relationship was, or aspired to be, above the social mores that they ridiculed. Indian workers are known to criticize social hierarchies through worktime joking and games (De Neve 2005, 119). “However [...] the game is enacted within their own lives and therefore unmistakably embedded in the gender and hierarchical relations of the workplace, which are themselves *constituted* and *evaluated* in the process of joking and teasing” (De Neve 2005, 119). This would mean that communal differences between cycle rickshaw pullers and their *gaowale* are reified but also criticized, and this resonates with research on similar types of workers in Delhi, where men who work closely with men who belong to other religious communities harbor degrees of communalism, but where they also see their co-workers as important parts of the social whole (Ramaswami 2007).

M.N. Srinivas thinks that, “A sense of humor probably enabled the poor and exploited to accept the conditions under which they were living, and it may also have been a substitute for more destructive expressions of interpersonal violence” (1976, 316), but my take is less cynical and I believe that it had a more generative role. Manoj told me that, “You can’t joke like that with unknown rickshaw men,” which affirms that their humor indexes social closeness and provides a wobbly bridge across communal divides between *gaowale*. Humor and horseplay are known as important types of masculine bonding for North Indian men, which they use to form cross-caste friendships and, “as a basis for shoring up community spirit and building trust” (Jeffrey 2010, 95). The men used humor that drew from stereotypical masculine activities like fighting, wrestling, and using public spaces, and they used it to index and strengthen their close relationships with other rickshaw men from their village. Their horseplay and humor were therefore masculine practices that were central to the maintenance of their *gaowale* relationships. As these playful and humorous masculine practices furthermore introduced excitement and playfulness to an otherwise dreary job,

they should be considered as important means by which the men supported each other on their labor migration circuits.

4.6 Support in Crises

Crises arose in Delhi and also back in the village, and whether the crisis was near or far, rickshaw men leaned on their *gaowale* for support because support from non-*gaowale* was hard to come by. In times of crisis, men who were co-villagers would come together, share advice, give emotional comfort, and whatever help that they could lend. Non-economic support was often the only thing that these relatively poor men had to offer one another. The exchange of mutual support between low-wage workers and migrants in the informal economy is key to managing difficulties (Kathiravel 2012, 110; Lindell 2002, 180), and research shows that cycle rickshaw pullers in London also find mutual aid and safety in times of difficulty primarily from their co-workers (Lyons 2007, 382). My interlocutors felt a responsibility to try to help their *gaowale* when they were experiencing a crisis, and they said that doing so was part of being a good man.

One afternoon, Aandhit arrived at *Taakat Chawk* and said that he had just been in an accident about one kilometer away. A car had hit and overturned his rickshaw as it sped past, throwing him to the pavement. He had injured his hand and all his workmates gathered around to see. It was bloody and swollen, with some probable fractures. He went on, describing how when he was thrown from his rickshaw, his daily earnings which he, like many rickshaw pullers, kept in his breast pocket, were scattered and lost on the busy street. It was an entirely plausible story, but Aandhit was known to be irresponsible with money, and he was also known for having a loose relationship with the truth, and that was probably why some of his workmates later told me

privately that they doubted his story. But whatever its origins, the crisis was nonetheless real, and Aandhit's workmates helped the best they could. They got cool water to clean his injured hand, and a couple of them fashioned a bandage from small towels. They gave him chewing tobacco and listened to him as he growled and complained about the motorist who hit him and about many other things.

Rickshaw men responded to their co-workers' crises whether they happened in Delhi or in the village. Niza learned that his wife in the village was experiencing stomach pain, and later that day he spoke with a friend in the village who reported that the sick woman had been taken to the local hospital. The friend promised to call Niza the following morning with an update about his wife's condition. Niza considered catching a train home that night, however the train ride was costly, and it usually took over two days to reach his village. He had only arrived in Delhi a couple weeks earlier and returning so soon would strain his finances. He decided to wait in Delhi until the next morning when he would hear an update on his wife's condition, but in the meantime he was very worried. He called all his family and friends in the village and asked them for details or any news. He was not his normal good-humored self. He sat on his rickshaw at *Taakat Chawk* but he would not take customers. Throughout the day, his *gaowale* each spent some time sitting with him in the back seat of his rickshaw. They all knew his wife, and they asked him about her condition, gave him advice, and reassured him. They offered him tobacco, and one even shared a joint with him which was the first time I ever saw the men at *Taakat Chawk* smoke marijuana.

It was hard to speak with Niza alone because his workmates kept approaching and chit-chatting. He continued hanging out at *Taakat Chawk* into the evening, and I asked him if he would try to take any customers before the day was over. He said that he would not because he had too much "tension" (used the English word). I asked why, then, did he not just go to his room and

relax. He said that when he and his workmates are stressed out, they do not like to sit alone in their rooms. He would only return to his room once his workmates had finished work for the day and were able to return with him. And then it clicked for me: I had been trying to interview Niza but kept getting interrupted by all his *gaowale* who stopped by to share a fancy cigarette and chit-chat, and these interruptions were the point for him. He was not returning to his room because he enjoyed the support that he was getting from the other cycle rickshaw pullers on the street corner. The next morning, I ran into some of Niza's village-mates before I found Niza. They had already received the word from Niza that his wife was fine and had returned home from the hospital. Later I found Niza who was in higher spirits, and when I asked him what the doctors had told his wife, he replied vaguely, "[It] could have been gas."

The *gaowala* bond between rickshaw pullers was practiced during emergencies by coming together, spending time together at work or in their rooms, and doing what they could to comfort and help one another. Engaging with one's workmates in itself might be thought of as a remedy for some of the alienating and dehumanizing conditions that poor migrant laborers in Delhi experience (Ramaswami 2006, 221-222), and no matter what other types of help the men could offer, if any, they never failed to donate their time and company to a *gaowala* in distress. The other side of this was that men who were facing crises in Delhi preferred to be in the company of their *gaowale*. During the course of my fieldwork, my girlfriend and I separated, and the rickshaw men came to know about it because they were endlessly interested in when she and I would marry and always asked about it. When I confessed about the breakup, which I was very upset about, they ceased to playfully harass me like usual, and they began sitting with me in my rickshaw for longer periods. Akyaar would gently rub my back to comfort me, and Aandhit shook his finger in my long face and sternly advised that I needed to have children with a woman so that she would be

unable to leave me. Niza bought a soda for us to share while we sat together, which none of the rickshaw men had ever before done, and over the next week or two others who I usually spoke with less made it a point to approach me as I sat on my rickshaw and ask me how I was feeling and to give me advice. Panchim, whose wife had passed away, had previously told me about his plan to “roam around” (*gumna*) in Assam and find a new wife, and when he heard about my breakup he invited me to join him and assured me that we would both be able to find new wives. To people in the U.S. who might say that someone who is experiencing stress or emotional turmoil needs “space” or to be left alone, I am lucky to be able to tell them that the *gaowala* remedy can work too, as the men’s persistent company and concern carried me through the difficult time.

I was not one of the rickshaw men’s village-mates, obviously, and the type of crises that they experienced were sometimes beyond that for which I was able to, or cared to, provide support. When Niza’s house was submerged in a flood, his wife, kids, and five cows were alright, but their whole house was ruined, and she and their children had no permanent shelter in their village. Niza was very worried about them. He decided to return to the village immediately, but when he tried to buy train tickets, he learned that flooding had obstructed the rail lines in Bihar and the usual trains were not getting through. Niza and many of his *gaowale* retired from their labor to the shady back street lined with parked rickshaws and lunch stalls. They gathered near a favorite snack vendor and discussed the strategy for getting home. One man was sent to the railway station to check on the current delays and schedules. He returned and reported that there was an alternate route and that train left in a few hours. The men began discussing plans to catch that train, but as this was happening they received a call from another villager who had just arrived in Delhi via that route, and informed them that those tracks would also likely be delayed by the flooding. Some more calls were made, and another inquiry put in at the train station. The gathering and exchange

of information between *gaowale* during this disaster helped them form better plans. In the end, Niza got a ticket for a train leaving sometime the next day, and for which he was optimistic that it would not be delayed by the floods. I did not volunteer to join him on the trip which, whether or not the train was delayed, would still have been a harrowing ordeal upon reaching the village. Reflecting on my decision from a comfortable and posh cafe in Delhi helped me see the cultural and economic distance that remained between myself and the rickshaw men despite all our rapport.

In his study of village life Srinivas (1976) remarked that, “whatever the rules governing inter-caste contact [...] they were ignored in an emergency” (216). Srinivas might as well have been commenting on cycle rickshaw pullers in Delhi who did not let differences of caste or religion come between them when one of their *gaowale* needed help. An excerpt from an interview with Akyaar is illustrative of this point. He said,

When someone is sick, you can give them money, help them get to the hospital, *then you will be a good man (to tum ek acchaa aadmi hogaa)* (my emphasis). Manoj, that crazy guy, he got into an accident, he got hurt, got taken to Safdarjung hospital, everyone from [*Taakat Chawk*] went looking for him, wondering what happened, [wondering,] “Did he die?” Everyone was looking for him, couldn’t find him. We went to the police and asked, found out about the accident, then three Muslims and one Hindu went to the hospital. We waited in the hospital with him for three hours, then we all took the doctor’s number and called [Manoj’s] family. When he left the hospital all his friends came and took him back to his room [in Delhi].

I asked, “What type of friends?” “*Gaowale!*” Akyaar firmly stated. “Always *gaowale*,” I mused out loud. “Always,” said the rickshaw man. His narrative highlighted that Hindu and Muslim *gaowale* cooperated to support one another in emergencies on the migration circuit, and it contained the idea that doing so was important to being a good man.

4.7 Cohabitation in Delhi

Most of my key interlocutors lived in rented rooms during the time that they spent in Delhi.³¹ These rooms tended to be located within a couple kilometers of their work sites, although some men commuted over five kilometers by public bus between their rooms and work sites. The rooms were what English speakers casually refer to as slums, and what are known locally as *jhuggi jhopri* (poorly constructed, informal or extra-legal settlements, occupied mostly by poor renters and migrants). Cycle rickshaw pullers shared rooms with anywhere from one to a dozen other men to split the cost of rent. The men with whom they shared rooms usually also worked as cycle rickshaw pullers, but sometimes they worked in other labor-class jobs. Rickshaw men clustered by religion in their Delhi housing, but it appeared that this rule was made to be broken. Among my core group of interlocutors, at least three Muslims regularly stayed with rooms full of Hindus. And Hindus of the relatively higher *Mandal* caste regularly cobbled together living situations with Hindus of the lower *Chamar* caste. The arrangements were flexible, with the one constant being that roommates were each other's *gaowale*. For example, Akyaar and Aandhit were brothers by consanguinity and lived in separate but nearby houses in their village of origin. They both pulled cycle rickshaws in Delhi and sometimes they shared a room there, but other times for the sake of convenience and to help their co-villagers who were always arriving and returning to Delhi at different times, they would take separate rooms so long as their roommates were considered *gaowale*. Those who provided their *gaowale* with support by sharing housing with them were seen by my interlocutors as “good men” (*acche aadmi*, or *sahi aadmi*).

³¹ Many rickshaw pullers in Delhi were pavement dwellers, but only one rickshaw puller with whom I regularly interacted did not stay in a room, and he reported that he did not have any *gaowale* in the city.

I remember the day when Aandhit had returned from the village, and he did not have a place figured out to stay for the night. He had his duffel bag containing mostly clothes in his rickshaw, and his normal angry expression was colored with some worry. He had talked to his older brother, Akyaar, who said there was no space available at the moment in the room in which he was staying. Aandhit began asking his other workmates if there was a place for him to stay in any of their rooms. He spoke with Panchim, and I could not catch the conversation, but he began nodding. A little later, I asked Panchim what had just transpired. Panchim said that one man who had been staying in the room that he shared with a few of his *gaowale* would be returning to the village the following day, so there would be a space available and he had told Aandhit that he could stay with them. I asked Panchim if his other roommates, who I knew were Hindus, would be okay with sharing their room with a Muslim, and Panchim quickly assured me, “No issues!” (used the English phrase, No issues). “And for tonight?” I asked, and Panchim said that they would find space for Aandhit tonight as well; “He’s our *gaowala*, isn’t he?”

I asked Panchim what time he would be returning to his room that evening. He told me 9:00pm which was an average quitting time for most rickshaw men and then, as I had hoped, he invited me to join him and his roommates for dinner. I enjoyed joining the men in their rooms after work because they provided good company and cooked delicious food. Around 9:00pm, Panchim and I pedaled our rickshaws to the shady backstreet where our *thekedaar* and all the lunch stalls were located. We locked up our rickshaws on the curb next to a long line of parked rickshaws all owned by our *thekedaar*. In the dark street we exchanged brief greetings with our *thekedaar* and we each unceremoniously paid him the daily rent of thirty rupees. Then I followed Panchim to the bus stop where we hopped an overcrowded government bus for three or four kilometers. The fare

would have been five rupees, but our stop arrived before the fare collector could push his way far enough down the aisle to take our money, and we jumped down without paying.

We were in a working-class area on a busy market street. I followed Panchim to a chicken seller and paid for 150 rupees of chicken meat, and then watched as the vendor grabbed a live bird from a cage, cut its neck and threw it in a barrel to bleed to death, and then butchered it. I am not sure if the chicken was considered halal, but I know that Aandhit did not complain. Next we stopped at a big table on which a variety of vegetables were displayed. On one corner of the table the vendor sat wrapped in a wool blanket, and on the other corner a propane lamp was attracting moths. Panchim and the vendor had a bare-bones conversation: “Onion?” “Thirty [rupees per kilogram].” “Give one [kilogram].” “Tomatoes?” “Forty [rupees per kilogram].” “Give half [a kilogram].” With our vegetables and chicken meat, we proceeded to the liquor store where I paid for a bottle of local-brand whiskey. Then we crossed the main road and walked a couple minutes along muddy paths into a *jhuggi jhopri* colony where buffaloes and goats obstructed the dark lanes, and I could hear the clunking of pots and hissing of stoves in the rooms all around me where dinners were being prepared. We reached Panchim’s room and found Aandhit, as well as the three other current roommates who I knew well from *Taakat Chawk*, already stripped to their underwear and setting up the gas stove and cooking utensils for the nightly meal.

We slipped off our sandals, washed our hands, feet, and faces from a bucket kept just outside the door, and found our places in the ten-by-twelve-foot brick room. A single light bulb dangled from the ceiling, and a small fan also hung dangerously low over the middle of the room and spun noisily making the dusty cobwebs on the walls quiver. The men’s belongings were stacked on the room’s single shelf which stretched across the back wall. There were some mats and blankets rolled up under the shelf, and satchels and plastic bags full of onions, clothing, and

whatnot were hung from random nails in the brick walls. Some twine was strung along one wall and used to hang clothing and towels. The room cost three thousand rupees per month which would be split between the five men staying there so that each one would contribute six hundred rupees per month — about the same as two or three days' wages.

Panchim and I laid out the groceries that we brought, and everyone helped cook the meal. I peeled the garlic, and Aandhit mashed the garlic with chilies and ginger into a fine paste. Panchim took out plates and fetched water for drinking and cooking. Kamal rinsed some rice and cooked it in a pressure-cooker over a single-burner stove connected to a small metal gas cylinder that was set up by the door to the room. Meanwhile, Sunil cleaned the chicken and put it in a wok with oil, tomatoes, and some spices. When the rice was done, he put the wok on the stove and boiled our curry, stirring it and sprinkling salt with one hand while he thumbed through his contacts on his mobile phone with the other hand. Manoj carefully poured the whiskey into glasses, measuring exactly the same amount for each man. Every inch of space was used, with five rickshaw pullers and me crouching and working on the floor. Pots, knives, rags, tobacco, and glasses were passed back and forth. The food was divided evenly between everyone, and we sat together on the floor and ate it with our hands, as is customary for many Indians.

After the meal, as they were finishing the bottle of whiskey, a couple men washed the dishes and swept the floor. Normally they would have spent time figuring out the exact cost of the meal for each man and making sure that anyone who had procured the ingredients was reimbursed, but this time the discussion was moot because I had paid for the shopping. Manoj, who had a train ticket to return to the village the next morning, rummaged through his luggage, packing and repacking, and double-checking his ticket. Around 11pm, as the men rolled out their sleeping mats, Panchim put on a *lungi* and walked me to the railroad tracks behind the settlement. Between

hiccups from the whiskey he said, “This place is no good. This place is just timepass.” There are public bathrooms with toilets and showers located five minutes away on the other side of this extra-legal settlement, but they charge a few rupees for entry so at night the men piss and shit on the railroad tracks. We pissed on the tracks and without any prompting Panchim continued, “In the village we don’t live with other castes. We each live with our own castes. But in Delhi we live with other castes, even Muslims.” “What’s the difference, why do you live separately in the village, but you will live together in Delhi?” I asked. He hiccupped, “In the village we do different work, some people do dirty types of work, so we don’t like to stay with them.” He paused as if he had lost the thread, so I urged him, “But in Delhi?” “Yes, we do different work here. Some pull a cycle rickshaw, some drive autos, some do construction...we all do *mazdoori* (blue-collar, contract labor) and we all call each other brother (*ham sab ek doosare ko bhai kahate hain*).” I said goodnight to Panchim and took an auto rickshaw across the city to my own room, and Panchim walked back to his room to share the cramped sleeping space with his four *gaowale*.

The rooms in Delhi were not considered homes, rather they were treated as temporary living situations that made good financial sense. They most often segregated by religion however, as I have just shown, they were relatively comfortable sharing rooms with their *gaowale* of different religions. The men told me things like, “Living [with my *gaowale*] feels good. Friends are available, brothers are available.” Panchim’s late night statement at the railroad tracks suggests that a state of brotherhood existed among cycle rickshaw pullers based on their common positions as laborers. But his explanation about how segregation was practiced in the village because some castes have “dirty” occupations suggest that he may have disliked living with Muslims in Delhi. Cohabitation with *gaowale* was the rule in Delhi, and it happened across castes, even if grudgingly.

This was because sharing the all-male spaces of their rented rooms was an important supportive practice on the migration circuit, and it was seen as part of being a good man-of-the-village.

4.8 Conclusion

As other male migrant workers in Delhi are known to form solidarity not through protests, group violence, slogan-shouting, or identification with a common leader, but through “quiet, less visible, synchronic activities, palpable interconnectivity, autonomous decision-making, and evasions of violence” (Ramaswami 2012, 183), the cycle rickshaw pullers’ solidarity was built on and sustained through quiet, quotidian acts of camaraderie, kindness, and support. None of the five practices that I just explored are assumed to stand on their own, nor are they together assumed to account for the entirety of the *gaowala* relationships. Rather, I believe that each of them was very important to all the rickshaw pullers in their attempts to be recognized as proper village-mates and men. There could be a lot of overlap between the practices when, for example, Panchim and Aandhit shared a glass of whiskey and a joke while relaxing in their room together. Sometimes the relationships did not make perfect sense for having the best support in Delhi. One can imagine that a cheaper room might have been found with non-*gaowale*, or that time spent cultivating relationships with non-*gaowale* in Delhi could have returned higher levels of support than one’s *gaowale* were able to provide. But the importance of the *gaowala* relationships needed to be measured on two fronts — the support that they offered in Delhi, and the bonds that they solidified in the village. Men were bound to care for one another in Delhi not only because it helped them survive on the migration circuit, but also because their workmates’ wives and families were providing them and their spouses with childcare, farming help, or help arranging the marriages of

their children. That is to say that the character of, and the obligation to participate in, the *gaowala* relationships in Delhi was, as the name suggests, heavily influenced by the fact that the lives of the men and their families were intertwined in the village.

For male migrant laborers who work together in Delhi, many of their ideas about spiritual pollution take a back seat to earning a living (Ramaswami 2007), and what I found among cycle rickshaw pullers affirmed the observation that between co-villagers, “friendships cut across not only castes but religious divisions as well” (Srinivas 1976, 229). I do not, however, want to create the impression that caste and religion were irrelevant between cycle rickshaw pullers who were from the same village. The men made many disparaging and distrustful comments about men of other castes and religions, and in particular the Hindus were very vocal about their distrustful of the Muslims. Support was exchanged across castes and religions on the migration circuit, but there are structural limits to inter-communal relationships (Srinivas 1976, 301), and some of the caste violations in Delhi were probably only possible because they happened out of sight of their village communities. That said, it would be incorrect to say that cross-communal solidarity was invented on the migration circuit; cross-communal relationships were cultivated and negotiated by every man in the village before they became migrants. Some practices were intensified in the city, such as sharing and mutual aid in times of crisis, and some were fairly novel, such as cooperatively distributing rickshaw customers and cohabitating cross-communally. As the next chapter shows, there was no static divide between the village and Delhi, and some of the solidarity cultivated in Delhi was continued once the men returned to the village.

Ethnographic research on Indian workers shows that, “the workplace forms a ‘shared workers’ space’ where friendships are forged and solidarities emerge which transgress borders of caste, but which is also highly gendered” (De Neve 2005, 111). My informants stated many times

when I asked about caste or religious divisions between co-villagers that their practices in Delhi were not about caste, but about being good men (*acche aadmi*) and treating one another as brothers. In the context of the migration circuit, *gaowala* relationships were practiced to affirm and perform a type of homosocial manhood based on supporting one another in their vulnerable positions as poor labor migrants. Considering the centrality of these practices to everyday life in Delhi, it is fair to say that the rickshaw men as laborers or migrants cannot be properly understood without simultaneously appreciating them as gendered actors whose village solidarity produces bonds of mutual support in the city.

5.0 Village Life

It was mid-June, and Akyaar, Aandhit, and Niza were preparing to return to their village in time to celebrate the Muslim holiday of *Eid*. We traveled together in an auto rickshaw from South Delhi to the Old Delhi train station, and we were met at the station by Sunil and Panchim's youngest son, Srinidas, who had recently begun pulling a rickshaw at *Taakat Chawk*. Sunil and Srinidas were Hindus, and they were not going back to celebrate *Eid* but simply to spend time with their wives. The five men's luggage piled on the train station platform formed a small mountain containing not many gifts or purchases made in Delhi, but mostly essentials that they had brought from home, and which they feared may go missing from their rented rooms in Delhi if they were left there during their visits home. The group seemed awkward to me as they stood around their stack of luggage, perhaps because I was not used to seeing them together during the day without their rickshaws.

They arrived three hours before their train departed. They only made this journey a handful of times every year, and the price of each man's train ticket was equivalent to two or three days' labor, so they wanted to be certain not to miss the train. Aandhit, who was characteristically on edge, kept handing his ticket to me and asking me what parts of it meant. He could not read English or Hindi, and he was growing worried that we had missed our train. To help set his mind at ease, he and I walked through the crowded station and pushed our way to the window of an inquiry booth. As we walked back to our pile of luggage, we had a disagreement about the meaning of what the inquiry booth worker had yelled to us through the glass, and we had to return and once again shove and squeeze our way to the front of the frenzied mob that was permanently formed outside the booth. Of course, no sooner than we had completed the hassle for a second time, then

the information that we had gained from our two battles at the inquiry booth began to be announced every sixty seconds over loudspeakers on our platform, and the announcements continued for the next couple hours. Aandhit found no humor in this, and he passed the time by barking at his older brother a list of chores and errands that needed to be completed in the village to prepare for *Eid*. Akyaar paid half-mind to Aandhit's perturbations, staring across the tracks, and periodically asking me if I was comfortable.

The train crawled into the station, and it triggered an intense sequence of events that started with scrambling to find our names printed on a paper list glued to the outside of the train car, then jostling our way onto the crowded car and handing our luggage through the train window, and finally debating with other passengers about whose seat was whose. The mood mellowed as Delhi faded, and the rickshaw men seemed comfortable and friendly with the other passengers with whom they shared their berths for portions of the journey, although they did not mention to anyone that they were rickshaw pullers. Tea and snack vendors passed through our cabin, and we treated one another and our fellow passengers. The men did not fast strictly for the period of Ramadan, except for Niza who would wait until late in the evening to eat or drink. He somehow managed to pedal his rickshaw around all day in the sun and traffic of South Delhi while fasting, not even drinking water, and this was one of the most amazing feats I have ever witnessed. Srinidas spent the evening watching Superman on a smartphone that belonged to a young man who was a factory worker in Delhi, and who was returning to Bihar for the holiday. Lights were shut off around 11pm, and I lay on the vinyl bunk seat with my head close to the open window, soothed by the cleaner country air, and I fell asleep.

It was maybe a couple hours later when I popped awake in the dark cabin, my mind swirling with anxiety about my research. I thought about the distance between the village and the city, and

whether and how it could be important for understanding rickshaw men. In the village, the rickshaw men's everyday lives were removed from the job of rickshaw pulling, yet they were not entirely separable from it because they were embedded in its context of circular migration — i.e. their village lives unfolded within the cycle of returning from Delhi and then needing to leave again on their next migration to Delhi — and this informed my interlocutors' approaches to an array of activities in the village which, in turn, could influence their decisions and abilities to return to Delhi. Furthermore, I was to observe that a number of these activities played significant roles in their endeavors to be, and be recognized as, proper men. On one hand, some of these masculine activities clustered around a notion of being a good head of the household. This included activities that supported the men's role as breadwinners, such as money-making activities that augmented their incomes from rickshaw pulling, as well as their participation in the reproduction of their labor. Beyond that, it also included spending time with their families, arranging marriages for their children, and helping their families travel regionally, e.g., to visit in-laws. On the other hand, there were activities that clustered around an expanded and diffuse notion of being a proper *gaowala* (see Chapter Four). Notable among these activities were participation in religious community, building and maintenance of relationships with fellow-villagers, and cultivation of a reputation for truthfulness. Together these clusters of activities revealed an important model of ideal manhood that spanned from home to tea shop, and that might be glossed as striving to be well-rounded patriarchs or popular village patriarchs, but which my interlocutors simply referred to as being “*acche aadmi*” (good men) or “*sahi aadmi*” (good or “correct” men). I have done my best to illustrate the thread of popular village patriarchy that ran through village life, and to indicate how for rickshaw men it was connected to circular migration and the job of cycle rickshaw pulling. But it seemed to me that tugging too hard at it risked unraveling that which is human, so I concentrated

on the white noise and rhythmic jostling as we sped along the dark tracks and tried to fall back asleep.

At dawn, we passed through Banaras and some passengers tossed flowers and coins from the open train doors into the calm, murky river that we crossed over as we left the city. My companions must have enjoyed not needing to go to work, and they slept late. To pass the time that day, Akyaar shared a story about when he and another of his *gaowale* had made the same journey, and his *gaowala* was so drunk that he unwittingly took the wrong seat on the train and got into a fight with the rightful owner of the seat. Srinidas and his new friend with whom he had watched Superman spent the second day wrestling and cuddling together in a type of spontaneous and intimate yet public homosocial bonding that is less common in the United States. More Bengali-speaking passengers boarded the train as we got closer to West Bengal, and the rickshaw men chatted with them about the mango orchards in West Bengal, and about places in the small city of Malda which was the government headquarters of the district in which the men lived, and where we disembarked from the train after a journey of nearly sixty hours.

It was the middle of the night when we exited the train station. From stands just outside the station, the men purchased sweets, pomegranates, oranges, and dates to give to their families. Then we took a battery-powered rickshaw across the city to a taxi stand where we waited about half an hour on the deserted street before a van came along and the driver agreed to take us to the village. There was little traffic on the country roads, but the van swayed and the driver laid on his horn as he swerved to avoid goats and cows. After about an hour the driver let us off on the side of the road and drove away. It was very dark, but this was the village where the men had grown up, and they were perfectly at home. Niza, Sunil, and Srinidas said goodnight and disappeared towards their homes. A teenage boy named Mani appeared on a cycle and was introduced as Akyaar's son.

Akyaar, Aandhit, and I loaded our luggage onto the cycle, and I followed them as they walked off the road into the forest. Aandhit directed my attention to something nearby, to a tree branch. “Mangoes!” he proudly announced. I peered and saw the shape of a very large mango dangling from the leaves. We walked through the mango trees for about ten minutes, approaching what seemed to me like the absolute middle of nowhere. We navigated an immense bamboo thicket and came into a clearing. Akyaar’s home was on one side of the clearing, and it faced Aandhit’s home which was thirty feet away on the other side of the clearing. Each home, made of brick and bamboo, had two rooms which allowed the men and their families much more space than the single rooms in Delhi that they often shared with many of their workmates. There were large wooden beds without mattresses in each room, and mosquito nets hung from the tall bedposts. Aandhit went to sleep in his home, and I shared a bed with Akyaar and Mani in their home.

5.1 Heads of Their Households

Akyaar and Aandhit’s wives woke up around 5am and began tending their stoves, cleaning pots, and sweeping the courtyard between their homes. By 6am sunlight poured through the cracks in the walls of Akyaar’s home. The room was larger than what most rickshaw men rent in Delhi, and there was a fancy tea set arranged on a shelf that also displayed some photos and religious paraphernalia. In one corner was a large metal trunk with a lock containing important documents, elegant clothing and fabrics, and some jewelry and cash. Decorating the walls were a couple glossy posters purchased from Malda city showing bright portraits of joyful, fat, naked, fair-skinned infants. Outside, the noises of daily life accumulated until it became impossible to sleep and I lifted

myself off the hard wooden bed and emerged into the courtyard. There was an outhouse on one side of the courtyard, and a well pump on the other side. A few old bicycles were piled against one side of Akyaar's house, and Akyaar's naughty goat that was named Moutushi was scratching itself against a cement pillar supporting the thatched canopy over his home's veranda.

Akyaar was already awake and busy chopping firewood and stacking it to be used in the household cooking fire. As he worked, he complained that his shoulders and back were hurting him, not from chopping the wood, but from pulling a rickshaw. I tried to help, but I was not as efficient as he was at the work, so he made me sit and watch as he completed it. The rickshaw men's wives did a disproportionately large amount of the housework, childcare, and agricultural work, but it would be incorrect to say that in the village rickshaw men only relaxed and enjoyed the labor provided by their wives. Most mornings Akyaar was quite industrious, for example, landscaping his courtyard or cutting strips of bamboo for basket weaving. One morning, he castrated a young goat because it is believed that doing so makes its meat more tender, and he grinned at me while performing the operation and said, "Sometimes I'm a doctor."

We bathed at the well pump near the men's houses, and several curious children watched as Akyaar instructed me in how to operate the pump and how to bathe. I crouched in my underwear and dumped pitchers of icy water over myself while the children gawked and called their friends to watch me fumble around. After the bath, Akyaar's wife, Sailoon, served us tea, biscuits, roasted vegetables, and flat round bread still warm from the stove. She was very short and thin, and she spoke better Hindi than her husband. She and Akyaar had met over twenty years ago when Akyaar used to help her mother with some work at her parents' home. Sailoon and Akyaar fell in love and used to meet secretly in the fields until they eventually confessed about their relationship to their parents. Akyaar's parents, who both died about ten years ago, did not approve of the relationship

even though Sailoon and Akyaar are both Muslims from the same caste. Akyaar and Sailoon got married anyway, and after the wedding Akyaar eventually convinced his parents to come meet Sailoon's parents, and gradually they softened and finally accepted their son's marriage. Sailoon was in a bad car accident about three years before I met her, and she had undergone extensive surgery on her arm. She displayed the deep scars as she told the story. She chatted with Akyaar as old friends do, and to me it seemed as if they were still very much in love with one another. In order that Akyaar and Sailoon could enjoy a night of privacy, the families moved me to Aandhit's home the next night.

Aandhit's wife, Aasmina (who was introduced in Chapter Two), had an ear infection that morning and was crying from the pain. Aandhit summoned the village doctor who came and treated her with antibiotics for the reasonable price of fifty rupees. I joked that the doctor should check Akyaar's head, and Akyaar laughed, "I must be crazy because when the passengers come and ask to go long distances, I always take them. They ask Aandhit but he doesn't go. He sends them to me." It was true that although Akyaar did not take every passenger who asked, he more easily agreed to taking long distance fares than did his moody brother. Aandhit was sitting with us at that moment and did not contest what Akyaar was saying. I believe that this was an instance when Akyaar was chatting and joking openly (and unashamedly) about his job with his family. As discussed in Chapter Two, Aasmina was cynical of the *mandaa* discourse, and some of the rickshaw men's wives would tell me that rickshaw pulling was "*chota kaam*" (lowly work). But the women knew that men needed to work and earn money, and they understood that high paying jobs were not available to poor men. Rickshaw pulling went a long way toward fulfilling the breadwinning role, but it was not considered a desirable job, and the men were not envied or assumed to be flush with money when they returned from Delhi. Still, their wives and families

generally believed that so long as they were able to send money home, then they could still be good husbands and fathers.

Material support, however, was not all that was expected. Heads of households had to supply money for all their family's needs, but they were also expected to participate in the social event of shopping in the local markets. This expectation, though, did not register as burdensome; the rickshaw men looked forward to spending time with their families and socializing with friends in the market. At local markets, they could bargain better prices from vendors with whom they had established personal relationships, they did not have to worry about transporting large or valuable items long distances to reach their homes, and they did not face discrimination based on their status as migrants. The flip side of this was that they thought Delhi markets were overpriced and unwelcoming, and the overall result was that most consumption and social reproduction happened in their villages.³²

Soon after we arrived in the village, I went with Akyaar and Sailoon and their children to a local market to prepare for *Eid*. In the market, formed by endless tents from which merchants sold infinite kinds of edible and non-edible items, Akyaar haggled hard for a new pair of shoes. The clerk told Akyaar that he should agree to a slightly higher price because, "What's ten rupees?" Akyaar replied civilly that "I do hard work. I earn my money ten rupees at a time. It is a big deal to a laborer like me." Akyaar and his son Mani and I got haircuts, and then Akyaar paid the barber for a head massage, a neck cracking, and to have his hair dyed black. We also visited a doctor who filled a cavity in Akyaar's tooth that had been bothering him, and gave his wife, Sailoon, some

³² Sunil bucked this trend, and I remember when he showed up at *Taakat Chawk* with a new duffel bag full of gifts for people in the village that he had just purchased in Delhi. He recited the price of everything: 230 rupees for a set of jewelry for his daughter, a new tote bag for his friend, the duffel bag was 300 rupees, a bottle of cologne, a new water bottle, a cheese grater, and so on. The gifts were all so inexpensive and modest that it broke my heart to see the care that he took to wrap them up and carry them back to the village.

tablets for headaches. But everyone's favorite part of the excursion was shopping for clothing for *Eid*. The whole family shopped together, discussing the price, quality, and beauty of each item that the merchants unfolded and displayed for them. Akyaar dished out money for nice new clothing for his family, and he gave some pocket money to Sailoon and his son Mani, and his family enjoyed the bonding time and collectively deciding what to buy. They saw many people in the market who they knew, and they loitered in the congested alleys between the tents catching up with acquaintances and old friends.

The men were also expected to devote time to teaching and playing with their children. They taught the children practical skills like farming, driving a motorcycle, and cooking, and they sometimes reviewed their children's school lessons with them. Akyaar answered my question about what his fatherly obligations were by saying, "I should take the kids in my lap, give them money, feed them, spend time with them," but as he was telling me this, he was teaching his young son, and Aandhit's young son, how to prepare a chicken for cooking. He demonstrated how to cut its neck, how to skin it, then how to chop it up. Later he played badminton with the children and gave them the fruits and sweets that he had bought at the train station. It was very important to most rickshaw men to educate their children, even their daughters, at least through primary school. Although they complained about the expense, some of them hired multiple private tutors for their children. I met a few men who were putting their children through college with their rickshaw pulling wages. Affective ties between parents and their children of course existed, and alongside these ties parents exercised an economic calculus in their interventions and guidance of their children's lives. In supporting their children's education and strengthening relations with the families of their children's prospective marriage partners, rickshaw men tended to the child-as-investment. About his older son, Mani, Akyaar chuckled, "All he does is eat and play cricket." But

when I asked about his future plans for the boy, he answered without hesitation: “I’ll get him married after five years, after school. I’ll demand a new motorcycle from the bride’s family. And 50,000 rupees for the wedding. [My son] will be able to roam around on the motorcycle. I’ll ride it too.”

The men saw themselves as authority figures in their households, and they believed that they had the authority to impose their preferences when arranging their children’s marriages. “If [a village man] was sufficiently ‘male’ he kept his wife and children under his control” (Srinivas 1976, 157), and failure to do so was cause for great distress. Aandhit’s oldest son, who had been away from the village working on a labor gang in Gujarat, wanted to marry a woman who he had known for a couple years. Aandhit approved of the marriage, but his son had been planning the marriage in accordance with the woman’s parents’ wishes. Aandhit kept calling his son and telling him to return home so that they could discuss the marriage, but his son was not obeying him. To make things worse, Aasmina openly opposed the marriage saying that the proposed dowry from the prospective bride’s family was too small. The combined insurrections were more than Aandhit could stand, and instead of continuing to live without his masculine honor, he attempted suicide. A few days after I arrived in the village, after a long, loud, and bitter argument, Aandhit barricaded himself inside his home and threatened to kill himself. We started to break the door down, but Aandhit suddenly unlocked the door and bolted out. Aasmina caught him by the collar, screaming at him. It took Akyaar and I longer than Aasmina to realize what was happening. Inside the room, Aandhit had doused himself with kerosene and was trying to jump in the family’s cooking fire on the edge of the home’s courtyard. We only realized what was happening when we smelled the kerosene, and by that time Aandhit was lurching for the fire and Aasmina was pulling him back. Aandhit yelled that his wife and his child would not listen to him, so he needed to die. He punched

Aasmina in the face, but the woman's grip was too tight, and he could not break free. She yelled that she would not let him die and leave her with no support. Akyaar and I helped restrain Aandhit, and eventually convinced him to calm down and bathe to wash off the kerosene. The episode was exceptionally violent and confrontational, but it was not completely out of character for Aandhit who was generally rash, quarrelsome, dramatic, and moody. I cannot say whether he really intended to harm himself, but I think the scene demonstrated the importance to the men of maintaining their positions of authority as heads of their households by revealing the frustration that results when they are unable to do so.

5.2 Aandhit Visits Panchim

Later that first morning, Aandhit and I left his family compound and walked along a dirt path scattered with goat droppings and shaded by bamboo groves. We said hello to his neighbor who was nursing her new baby in a doorway, and to her husband who was busy building them a new home. A growing crowd of curious children followed us, and I tried to learn each of their names. I asked Aandhit what had changed in the village since the last time he had been here, and he said blandly, maybe even with a hint of disgust, "There's no secure employment here and no money, so how could anything change?"

When rickshaw men returned to their village, they were still enmeshed in a web of longstanding relationships with their fellow villagers, and it was an important part of being a popular village patriarch to nurture these relationships. This included the relationships that they leaned on for support in Delhi, and which did not disappear when they returned to the village. Relationships between rickshaw men were still practiced in the village, but usually with less

intensity and frequency because in the village they had other means of support available to them, and they needed to devote time to their families and other friends. Hosein had given Aandhit some money in Delhi, and Aandhit had promised to carry it to the village and give it to Hosein's wife. Aandhit and I stopped by Hosein's house so that Aandhit could fulfill his promise, and Hosein's wife served us tea and biscuits while she asked about our trip from Delhi. No doubt she had already heard over the phone from her husband or one of the other men who worked at *Taakat Chawk* about me and my purpose in the village. Hosein's house was larger than most in the village. It was two stories and painted the same shade of pink as the skin of the naked babies on the posters in Akyaar's house. Some months later, when I saw Hosein again, I remarked at the size of his house, and he said that he had built it by working hard as a rickshaw puller. I asked if he received any money from his parents or from selling land. He said, "No," and called over a friend who was standing nearby: "He is asking about my big house in the village, and he doesn't believe that I made it from my cycle rickshaw earnings." The two men smiled and laughed about this. "So, you built that house ten rupees at a time? From carrying passengers?" I asked. "Yes, and last year I sold some cycle rickshaws. I had about twenty of them, and I was collecting rent daily." "I see." He continued, "But then there wasn't space to park them at night and [Delhi city government] started giving us more problems, so I sold them and put the money towards my house. Now I only have five [rickshaws]."

The *gaowala* relationship that Hosein and Aandhit practiced in Delhi still mattered when Aandhit returned to the village, and Aandhit maintained it by keeping his word and delivering the money to Hosein's wife. Despite Hosein's role as a small-time *thekadaar* and his somewhat better economic situation, I did not notice any instances in which class became an issue in his relationships with other rickshaw men, and perhaps this was because he pedaled a rickshaw

alongside his renters. However, the distinction between rickshaw men who rented their rickshaws, and those who owned multiple rickshaws and collected rent from others was important (for more on *thekadaar* and the cycle rickshaw industry, see Chapters One and Two), and Hosein's relative economic success was proof of this. Being a *thekadaar* represented a rare path to improving economic conditions for Muslims in Hosein's village who all belonged to the middle ranking *Sabzi* caste, or *sabzi bechnewale jaati* (caste of vegetable mongers). In my village field sites, not a single Muslim had obtained government employment, which is one indication that they faced structural discrimination. There were a few relatively rich Muslims, like Hosein, and they had all acquired their wealth from private business. When I asked whether low-caste Hindus from the village sometimes got government employment, Aandhit told me that they did, and that, "They leave their caste to get it. They go to college, eat beef, they leave their caste." In Aandhit's mind, acquiring one of the coveted positions — for example on the police force or with the railway — required a degree of compromising one's caste ideals that Muslims in his village were above.

Hierarchy and communalism existed at the structural and inter-personal levels, and it posed limitations to, but did not necessarily disallow, meaningful cross-caste relationships between fellow villagers. Rickshaw men practiced many cross-caste relationships with their fellow villagers, and among the many reasons for doing so, one stood out with regard to rickshaw pulling: such connections might become critical means of support in the context of labor migration. When we left Hosein's house, Aandhit led me into the part of the village where Dalit Hindu castes called *Chamar* and *Dom* lived. He was perfectly comfortable in that part of the village, and people greeted him along the way. Indeed, he had spent his childhood playing on those paths and with many of the people who now were heads of their households in that part of the village. We came to the house of one of his Hindu friends and chatted casually with them on the veranda for a few minutes.

As we walked away, I commented, “They didn’t invite us into their home.” Aandhit just shook his head. “Do they ever invite you in?” Again, he just shook his head and his expression suggested that he fully understood the reasons why. It should be considered that Muslims and Hindus contested the issue of whose ranking was superior; the Hindus may not have invited Aandhit into their home, but Aandhit might also not have wanted to enter. “Dissensus regarding the ranks of particular castes was part of the dynamics of the *jati* system” (Srinivas 1976, 189).

Panchim’s home was also in the Dalit part of the village, and we stopped by to visit him. Panchim had returned to the village a few weeks prior, and we found him wrestling with a sheet of steel that we helped him hoist onto the top of his outhouse. As he hammered it in place to create a roof for the little structure he said, “We also have to do work around the home.” Panchim’s home was attached to a chain of three other homes. His two brothers, Sankar and Manoj, each owned one of the homes where they stayed with their wives and children, and their mother lived in the third home. The space in front of the homes was divided by high brick walls so that each home had its own courtyard and some privacy. Panchim’s home was much like Akyaar and Aandhit’s home. It consisted of two rooms, internally unconnected (the rooms were adjacent to one another, and each had its own front door). Both rooms had brick walls, packed earth floors, electric ceiling fans, and large wooden beds. Mice skittered across the floor, and a spider that was much bigger than the mice ran out of the rafters and dipped into one of the cracks between the bricks in the wall.

Panchim invited us into his room, and he directed his son’s wife, who stayed in the other room, to prepare tea for us. Panchim and Aandhit talked about news from *Taakat Chawk*, and developments in the village such as who was building a house, and where. The young woman served us tea, and then she sat attentively in the doorway. She did not enter the conversation when

Panchim laid out his upcoming plans to travel to Assam, to the natal village of his deceased wife, to find a new wife. Later, when she had an opportunity to speak with me alone, she asked me to try to discourage Panchim from remarrying because she felt that their house and incomes were too small to support another person. Despite her discretion in that instance, she and her husband, Srinidas, had a loud and nasty argument with Panchim about that very subject one evening shortly after Aandhit and I had visited. Panchim, as the head of the household, would not budge in his plan to depart for Assam to bring back a new wife. Previously, when we were in Delhi, Panchim had invited me to go with him to Assam to see its beautiful tea fields, and now that his plan to travel there was materializing, I told him that I would accompany him because the trip seemed vital to this rickshaw man who, by this point, I liked and was curious to understand in a holistic way.

I had lost track of the mega-spider and was nervously scanning each hole in the walls, when Aandhit mentioned that we had just come from Hosein's house where we had delivered some of Hosein's earnings to his wife. Panchim said, "Uncle Hosein, who lives over there [pointing towards where Aandhit and I had come from]? Twenty years ago, when I first started pulling a cycle rickshaw in Delhi, it was with him I stayed and ate." "And why did you stay with him and eat with him in that time?" "I was in a difficult spot. I didn't have a room, and I was an out-of-towner (*pardeshi*). Here in the village we have our own places, so we don't eat together or stay together. When you're an out-of-towner you need to make friends because you don't have anyone." "How was the experience living and eating with Hosein?" "It was good! I started calling him uncle, and he started calling me son." The way that Hosein, the Muslim, and Panchim, the Hindu, invented kinship names for one another in Delhi reminded me of the way that students at Indian universities will apply fictive kinship terms to their new relationships at the universities, often to

shroud with wholesome language what may otherwise be considered immoral relationships (Abraham 2002; Nakassis 2014). We sipped our tea and I remembered that Panchim had said that there was a brotherhood among *gaowale* in Delhi. As when they shared a room in Delhi (see Chapter Four), Panchim and Aandhit now appeared to be completely at ease in each other's company. I believe that their bond was strengthened from having co-habitated in Delhi, resembling friendships that Indian factory workers create on the shop floor that are continued once they leave work (De Neve 2005, 126). As a matter of fact, Aandhit later told me that this had been the first time that he had ever entered Panchim's village home.

After a little while Srinidas showed up. Srinidas was a talented musician, and he supplemented his earnings as a rickshaw puller by playing keyboard at weddings and festivals. Panchim announced that his son was a "keyboard master" (in English) and we all went into the other room for a demonstration of the master's skills. Srinidas wore a full-length *lungi* without a shirt. He was much thinner than his father, and he sported a thin mustache and neatly oiled hair. The young man punched some buttons, and the keyboard generated a beat. He waved his hands across the keys and a catchy melody filled the sparse room. He dabbled between the keyboard's string and horn sounds. Every few minutes he would change the rhythm and he accompanied it with dramatic solos. As he did so, he stared directly at me, confidently; his serenade and 'stage presence' was captivating, and he punctuated it by making generous use of the keyboard's pitch-bending wheel. The music was psychedelic and really entertaining. It occurred to me that probably none of Srinidas's passengers in Delhi would suspect that the thin young man they had paid to haul them through traffic was a musical virtuoso. He stared at me knowingly as he layered ever more exotic sounding strings around a rumba beat. He toggled the pitch wheel, I applauded, and I reflected on Aandhit's earlier proposition that nothing in the village really changes.

5.3 Worship with Popular Patriarchs

Later that night, I went with Panchim to a theater production that portrayed stories from Hindu mythology. Whereas in Delhi rickshaw men were too focused on procuring essentials and preparing their nightly meal after work to have energy for much else, in the village it was their masculine privilege to enjoy free time made available by the unpaid domestic labor of their wives and female family members. The well-rounded patriarch used this time to participate in a variety of activities including attending religious functions in the village. It was nearly 9pm — usually almost bedtime in the village — when I met Panchim. He had been drinking locally brewed liquor and was drunk. As he explained it, “I took a sip, and then the whole bottle disappeared!” The performance was staged in a clearing in the woods, not far from Panchim’s home. As we walked there, Panchim forgot his camaraderie with Hosein and Aandhit, and repeated to me his belief that Muslim houses were dirty, and that I might get sick from drinking the water in Muslim houses because they were unhygienic. At the performance, actors wearing intricate costumes performed on the stage and then made their way through the audience. An actor with an unforgettable singing voice, and wearing a fearsome mask, passed near us. Panchim told me that he was portraying a beggar, and that he was also collecting donations from the audience. We gave small donations and Panchim explained that they were a gift to the theater troupe, and a gift to God. The performance was entirely in Bengali language, and it was the kind of performance that would probably seldom be found in Delhi. Moreover, as Panchim explained on our way out of the theater, “[In Delhi] you have to feed and water yourself, wash your clothes, everything.” In the village where his daughter-in-law provided him with free domestic labor, he had more leisure time to enjoy such religious performances.

Muslim men, too, took advantage of their patriarchal positions and the free domestic labor that they received (only in their village) to participate in a broad range of activities including religious functions. The Muslim rickshaw pullers had returned to the village to celebrate *Eid*, which had spiritual significance to them and was appreciated as a time to spend with family and friends. On the morning of *Eid*, Aandhit, Akyaar, Akyaar's son Mani, and I put on nice clothing and went to the local mosque. Women and girls were not allowed to participate. We washed our feet and faces outside the mosque, and then filed in. The mosque was simply a cleared patch of jungle encircled by five-foot-high cement walls. We laid our prayer mats on the jungle floor in tight rows next to the other worshipers. We kneeled together and spiders of various sizes and colors scurried across the mats. In front of the congregation, an old man wearing a fancy robe delivered a long chant conveying the message that one ought to love and help his brother despite his poverty. People started looking at the time and murmuring, and then several of the men interrupted the old chanter, telling him time was running short. We bowed our heads to our mats in a prayer to God, and after that a couple men circulated through the attendees to collect cash donations for constructing a new mosque. I thought that this part of the program was wrapping up after most men had given five or ten rupees, but it was just beginning. The old chanter in the front began exhorting the congregation to give more. As the collectors passed individuals, he called them by name, suggesting that they might be able to give one hundred rupees more. Some of the men coughed up additional money. The collectors passed through the crowd three, four, five times. Other worshipers began to join the old leader in pressuring their Muslim *gaowale* to donate more and more. Niza announced, "Akyaar sir, you've done a lot of work, you have a bit of money, please don't be stingy (*kanjoos*)!" Akyaar called back, "It's a bit of a problem for me. These days work has been down (*mandaa*)."

Akyaar made another small donation of ten rupees, and then he

instructed me that, “Everyone here knows me. They know that I don’t lie.” Akyaar then called to Mani, who was sitting some rows behind us, to give ten rupees which the teenager did. Many of the men called upon their fellow worshipers in this way. Those who refused to make donations became the targets of pressure from more and more men around them. It was lively and seemed very chaotic to me. Someone cracked a joke which I did not understand and everyone nearby who heard it had a good laugh. Among the many simultaneous calls and responses, one small squabble erupted over how much one particular man was obligated and able to donate. The collection went on for at least fifteen minutes, during which time the men all ended up making public displays of their material support for their Muslim community. After this, we rolled up our mats and exited the spidery mosque, with the sense of being men having done their religious duty. The mood among the exiting crowd was warm and fraternal, with many greetings and blessings exchanged.

5.4 Ice Cream for the In-Laws

The day after *Eid*, we woke up at 5 o’clock in the morning and departed at 6 o’clock to visit Akyaar and Sailoon’s oldest daughter who had married into a family that lived in the neighboring state of Bihar. Sailoon walked with her two youngest children, and she followed dutifully behind Akyaar as we walked through the mango orchards and out to the main road. Their teenage son, Mani, stayed home to watch over the house and goats, and to concentrate on his schoolwork. As we waited for the first bus, I asked Akyaar if his wife ever takes this journey without him. He said she did not, and that if she did it would not seem proper (“*nahi accha lugta hain. Nahi sahi hain*”). Because of Akyaar’s migration schedule, he and his wife were only able to make this journey two or three times a year. Escorting his wife and children there was part of

Akyaar's role as a husband and father, and many of the women with whom I spoke confirmed this, saying that it was their husband's obligation as head of the household to escort them on trips outside the village. The wives of rickshaw men all informed me that their ability to visit relatives who lived outside of their village was restricted since their husbands spent much of the year away in Delhi.

The journey was fairly epic and consumed most of the day. On the main road, we caught a crowded bus which carried us forty-five minutes down the road, and next we had to haggle for a taxi. Akyaar got into an argument with the driver over a few rupees. I would have thought that Akyaar would have more compassion for a fellow low-waged transport worker, but in this instance guarding his own hard-earned money came first. In the end, the taxi transported us to a train station where we purchased some milk-based sweets to give as a gift to the in-laws. When the train pulled up, it was impossibly crowded. Somehow Sailoon slipped inside one of the cars, and her small son and daughter were passed to her through the window. Akyaar and I could not push our way into the train because it was so crowded that multiple passengers were jammed into the doorway, crammed against each other, shifting for control over every toehold. We stood on a step outside the train, just below the doorway, which we shared with two other men, and we found space to grasp the metal guide rails that framed the outside of the train door. As the train rolled out of the station, Akyaar advised me to hold on tight. We picked up speed, reaching about fifty or sixty miles per hour, and we clung to the side of the train, pressing as closely as possible against it whenever poles or bushes zoomed past. The mango orchards became fewer, and wheat and corn fields spread over the countryside and smokestacks from brick factories spiked into the bright sky as we entered Bihar. At the stops we readjusted our grips and called through the train window to check on Sailoon. Within a couple hours we reached our station. The sweets that we had bought

earlier that day had become smashed and melted together while in Sailoon's possession within the compression chamber of the train car. My hosts were in good spirits though, and as we departed the station in an auto rickshaw packed with ten other people Akyaar chatted with the other passengers. Our auto clunked across broken roads, honking as it overtook bull-carts and stray goats, and at a couple places we had to get down and help push the dusty yellow and green steel container with wheels across ravines and mud pits that cut through the road. The ride terminated at a riverbank where we rode a ferry loaded with motorcyclists and their motorcycles across the river. From there our journey was completed with a couple of additional long and uncomfortable auto rickshaw rides through the countryside.

Akyaar's in-laws were very poor. Their house was in disrepair and despite the money that one of the young men among them earned by working on construction labor gangs in other states and sent home, they were in debt to their landlord and strained by the day-to-day cost of living. We greeted Akyaar's oldest daughter, her husband, and several other of Akyaar's in-laws. Akyaar's daughter's father-in-law — the head of that household — was however not at home when we arrived. Akyaar was very eager to see him, so while Sailoon stayed at the house with her children and her in-laws, Akyaar and I walked into the fields on the outskirts of the village to find the father-in-law. We found him sleeping on a bamboo platform under the shade of a bamboo grove. We sat and talked a bit. I asked if many men from his village pulled a rickshaw in Delhi. The father-in-law leaned to look past Akyaar at the strange foreigner who wanted to know about rickshaw pullers. He asked Akyaar, "Does he smoke?" I answered, "No." He asked Akyaar, "Does he drink?" I answered, "No." The father-in-law contemplated for a minute. I asked another question about cycle rickshaws: "What percentage of your village-mates would you say go to Delhi to pull a rickshaw?" But he was not having it: "You're asking about cycle rickshaw pullers. Why?

They work, they eat, they make a living, that's it. Let's wander around the field." The man was not grumpy, but I believe that he was completely uninterested in the subject which had little immediate bearing on his situation. We walked through his field, and he talked about his corn and mustard greens. He was happy to answer questions about their value, the harvest schedule, and so forth. Akyaar was very interested to discuss the various crops and their values with his in-law, and the men talked at length. Cycle rickshaw pulling was itself perhaps irrelevant in that moment, but in the context of circular migration, Akyaar had limited time to make these visits and therefore each visit became a relatively rare and precious opportunity to catch up and strengthen ties.

After returning from the field and dropping off some fodder for the family's goats, Akyaar, the father-in-law, and I walked together to the nearby town where we explored a clothing market and the father-in-law treated Akyaar to a new tailored shirt. I asked Akyaar if his in-law always buys him things like this. With a big smile he said, "Yes, it's his duty (*farz*)."

Whenever Akyaar visited these in-laws, he enjoyed the continued repayment of the gift he made to them when he gave his daughter to marry their son. We sampled some fried snacks in the bazaars and then walked to the bank of the Ganges river. We paused to watch a beautiful sunset over the river and witnessed a rare pink river dolphin jumping in the currents. Akyaar and the father-in-law sat together enjoying the sunset, and I asked Akyaar what he was thinking about. He answered, "There's pain here in my shoulders and upper back." He explained that about five years before we met, he had worked on a labor gang building electrical towers in Bihar. He fell from the top of one of the towers and badly injured his back, and pain from the old injury surfaced in his daily activities and was exacerbated by rickshaw pulling. As we walked home, we stopped at a colorfully decorated cart and Akyaar treated us to ice cream. Akyaar bought an extra ice cream sandwich for one of the small children back at the in-laws' house. Seeing that it would take us another fifteen minutes to

reach the house, I told him it was not going to work, but he assured me, “It’ll be fine” and put it in his pocket. Two minutes later, he had to eat it himself because it was leaking out of his pocket, melting, running everywhere. I suspected that Akyaar did not usually buy ice cream, and that he was unfamiliar with the stuff.

We had a big nighttime meal with Akyaar and Sailoon’s in-laws. Akyaar smiled warmly and chatted briefly from time to time with his daughter, but his wife paid more attention to their daughter, sharing the cooking duties with her and catching up on news and gossip. The next day during our trip back to Akyaar and Sailoon’s village, Sailoon would fill her husband in on all she had spoken about with their daughter. That night at the in-laws’ house, Akyaar was more interested in conversing with his daughter’s father-in-law and her brother-in-law who would soon depart for work in Uttar Pradesh to build electrical towers on a labor gang. Besides seeing his daughter and escorting his wife to see their daughter, Akyaar’s other main mission was evidently to strengthen ties with the male in-laws by spending time with them. Akyaar confirmed this when I asked him about it, saying that because of his close relationship with the in-laws they could be relied on to provide support during hardships, and they had done so in the past. Akyaar was performing his duty as head of his household by helping his wife and family visit their daughter, and he was also strengthening his support network.

In the morning, when we exited the in-laws’ courtyard and walked down the road towards the area where auto rickshaws collect passengers, Akyaar could not help turning around and waving goodbye every ten feet, and he continued doing so for half a kilometer. I spent the arduous return journey wondering how to conceptualize this side trip. A narrow view of circular labor migration in which migrants oscillate between rural and urban poles would fail to recognize its relevance. When I thought more expansively about the men’s positions as migrants, it became

clear that this trip was crucial for maintaining ties of kinship and support. Akyaar's migratory situation heightened the trip's importance because visiting in-laws represented an opportunity to strengthen supportive ties that could help mitigate the precarity inherent in circular labor migration. And at the same time, Akyaar's migration schedule constrained his availability to make the trip. Part of his difficulty in saying goodbye lay in the knowledge that migration would likely prevent him from returning to see his daughter and in-laws for maybe half a year. The context of labor migration and the obligations for a male head of the household to escort his family on travels and maintain ties with his in-laws provided compelling frameworks through which to understand this trip. But then I thought of the sunset over the river, of the enjoyment that Akyaar found in chatting with fellow travelers on our journey, and of his happiness when he greeted his daughter, and the ability of such frameworks to encompass the meaning of the trip started to seem as imperfect as one's pocket is for holding an ice cream sandwich on a hot summer evening.

5.5 Gumna with Akyaar

Back in his village, Akyaar and the other rickshaw men spent a lot of time doing what they referred to as *gumna* (wandering around). *Gumna* often appeared like walking or riding around on a motorcycle to see if anything interesting was happening, or in the hopes of bumping into friends. *Gumna*, as performed in the village, was a masculine activity since women were afforded less leisure time than men to participate in it, and their physical mobility was restricted and surveilled. Women who passed from place to place in the village were usually on a specific errand, while it was men who were found wandering around to see what developed, hanging out in public areas and tea shops, and congregating in the mango orchards to play cards or cricket. *Gumna* promoted

the cultivation and maintenance of an expansive set of *gaowala* relationships by creating opportunities for interactions with many villagers, especially other male villagers, in many different places in the village. Such relationships were not usually practiced as intensely as were the *gaowala* relationships in Delhi. Often just a friendly hello, a little casual conversation, or hanging out in the same spaces was enough to maintain the sort of friendships that made others recognize someone as a good man. The version of the *gaowala* relationships practiced in the village was therefore diffuse when compared with the relationships practiced in Delhi. Staying friendly with a great many people was enjoyable for the men, and there was a chance that sufficiently tended friendships could translate to crucial support later during a crisis or labor migration. Lying, and the perception that someone was dishonest, was understandably a major stumbling block in cultivating supportive relationships among village men. When roaming around the village and hanging out with fellow villagers, the popular village patriarch never missed a chance to highlight his own truthfulness. Whereas the men assumed that unknown people in Delhi were untrustworthy, they were interested in the reputations for truthfulness or dishonesty of their fellow villagers, even unknown ones, and this must have had to do with being bound together by sharing the same place and having mutual friends.

Akyaar invited me to *gumna* with him early one morning. We walked away from the main road, through orchards and agricultural land. The surroundings were green and lush, and the air was filled with steam from evaporating dew. Magnificent webs were strung between the mango trees and across the paths, and cartoonishly large spiders clung motionlessly to the center of each web. I ducked to avoid them, imagining they must entangle many unfortunate small birds. The area was spacious, unpolluted, calm...almost the exact opposite of Delhi. We passed some women who were returning from their fields carrying large bundles of grass on their heads and small

shovels and knives in their hands. They had spent the dawn weeding their garden plots and were going to feed the weeds to their livestock. Akyaar recognized a woman who was walking our way and overtook us on the path. They were of some distant relation, and they referred to one another as brother and sister. Akyaar told her about our trip to visit his daughter, and she told him about her family's *Eid* celebrations before turning down a different path to tend her garden.

Further on, Akyaar pointed out a ripe yellow mango hanging high up in one of the trees. We threw stones at it until it fell and then shared the delicious fruit. We rinsed the sticky juice from our hands in a puddle, disturbing a small scorpion that scuttled out of the way in the muddy water. There was a commonly understood rule in the area that one must not pick mangoes from trees owned by other people. However, if the mango had fallen from the tree, or if it was hanging and was ripe, then a hungry passer-by was permitted to help themselves since it would otherwise soon rot. Akyaar's brother, Aandhit, was notorious for making generous use of this rule, sometimes loosely interpreting it. Whenever we would *gumna* in the fields, Aandhit would scan the trees for ripe mangoes. Sometimes he would hop the fence of small garden plots to check on the mango trees in there. He never failed to find a mango that was ripe, or "ripe enough" (*kafi-kafi pakka*), and if he were walking with his wife, he would bury several of them in the center of the great bundle of grass that she carried on her head. When I told Akyaar and Niza about how Aandhit picked up mangoes all the time, they had a good laugh. I asked them if they thought Aandhit was stealing. "If you pick one to eat that's okay. If you pick them and stuff them in your bag, then you're a thief." "And what if I'm always picking them off the ground, always looking for them on the ground?" "Then you're a mango searching man (*aam dhoondne wala*), that's all." We laughed and at that moment Akyaar told me that he did not imitate Aandhit's dishonesty (*mein esa beimani nahi karta*), and reminded me again that everyone knew him, and they knew that he did not lie.

Akyaar and I walked on and crossed a small river in which a villager was spreading out a fishing net. Akyaar greeted him and asked for any news (*khabar bol!*) but the fisherman said there was none. Our morning *gumna* took us past Akyaar's friend's house, and Akyaar called for his friend through the thin walls (*salaam aalekum!*) and his friend came out to greet us (*waalekum asalaam!*). Akyaar asked him what was new (*khabar bol!*), and his friend told him that he needed to buy a cow at the local cattle market, but he did not know how to choose a good one. Akyaar had a reputation for being able to recognize a healthy cow, and the friend asked Akyaar if he would come to the market and help him choose one. Akyaar agreed, so we walked out to the main road and hailed a local taxi built in the *jagaad* (jury rigged) style of affixing the flat bed of a trailer or wagon to the front half and motor of a motorcycle. The contraption sputtered, emitting black smoke, and it carried us a few kilometers to the cattle market. The market was big and crowded, and there were no women there — only men and cows and goats and money trading hands. We mucked around in the sun and mud and cow piss for a couple of hours, and the men slapped the backs and flanks of the cows, and they discussed which one to buy. Akyaar did a lot of work in helping to choose the right cow and negotiate the price. He inspected the cows' teeth and hooves, pointing out which ones were nice and fat, and pinching them on their backs to make sure. He interacted there with many men who he knew from his village, commenting on the health and value of their livestock. Everyone present would have witnessed this; it was a public display of his skill in an important all-male arena and performing the favor for his friend would help establish Akyaar as a popular village patriarch. In the end, they settled on a cow that cost about five thousand rupees. The cow's new owner was pleased, and he invited us to dinner in his home thereby bringing to a happy close the *gumna*-to-mutual aid loop that defined men's *gaowala* relationships in the village.

We returned from the cattle market to Akyaar's village, and we stopped by one of the two permanent tea stalls in the center of the village. All castes and classes of men congregated there, although women and children were usually excluded. There were about a dozen men in the tea shop, and I recognized half of them from Delhi where they pulled cycle rickshaws. Fifty percent of men from that village went to Delhi to work as cycle rickshaw pullers at some point or another. We relaxed in the tea stall for a long time, recovering from the heat of the cattle market, and new men who were *gumna*-ing around the village would arrive and sit with us. The men exchanged gossip and treated one another to tea, tobacco, and sweets. While everyone was drinking tea and talking, I went and sat on one of the wooden benches next to Niza. He said, "You know why I come to the tea shop? I can drink tea alone at home. Here how many men are sitting?" I answered, "About ten men, no women..." He cut me off, "So women can't come, they can drink tea at home. They have housework and kids. Why do I come here? Here ten men are sitting, talking. Some are liars and some are truthful. How can I know what the truth is?" "The truth about what?" "Anything, who is telling the truth. I come here, drink tea, and I listen to one man's talk, and then I listen to another man's talk. I listen to everyone's talk. If one man is telling lies then I listen to another man and he will say differently, and another man will say differently. That's how I can know if they are liars. If some men are saying the same things, then I come to know that they are being truthful." Turning and pointing to Akyaar, Niza grinned and announced, "This guy, he lies like a sister fucker," and Akyaar rained gentle punches over Niza's head and back.

5.6 Further Considerations for Breadwinners

Rickshaw men were not considered proper heads of their households or, more generally, good men, if they did not financially support themselves and their families (see Chapter Two). Rickshaw pulling, however, was not their only method for earning a living. The men might spend years pulling rickshaws, but during that time they also raised money from other sources. They navigated between various manual wage labor jobs, loaned and borrowed money, and undertook small-time self-employment. They also managed any number of investments that were geared towards medium or long term payoffs such as livestock, gardens, or their children's marriages. Their multiple economic ventures reminded me of the way that farmers in Uttar Pradesh are known to diversify their economic portfolios, guiding their children towards a range of careers while also tending their agricultural investments (Jeffrey 2010). When I appreciated rickshaw pulling within the fuller constellation of economic activities, it became clear that while the work of rickshaw pulling provided an unacceptably narrow way of defining the men who did it (i.e., they are not *just* rickshaw pullers), starting with an understanding of the masculine imperative to be good breadwinners provided a framework within which the periodic performance of rickshaw pulling made sense. The hodge-podge of money-making activities in which my interlocutors engaged afforded them slim chances of lifting themselves out of their lowly economic class (although it was possible that their condition would improve if their children gained secure employment or favorable marriages). However, I do not see the rickshaw men from the same perspective that Breman (1996) used to describe the impoverished migrants who he studied in Gujarat; rickshaw men ought not to be regarded as forlorn and structurally determined "footloose" workers who roam the country as a reserve pool of cheap labor. Rickshaw men were severely constrained in their economic circumstances, but they navigated and chose between an array of employment and

economic opportunities, thereby exercising agency and following their preferences. Throwing off the chains of hard manual labor was not realistic for them, but focusing on this misses the point that through their participation in a portfolio of modest economic activities they could realistically expect to establish themselves as proper heads of their households and well-rounded patriarchs.

Akyaar and Aandhit were trying to buy land on which to build new houses for themselves and their sons, and as the seller's deadline approached the men scrambled to raise the money. The bank had declined Akyaar's application for a loan, so he tried asking his wife's family for some money. We rode cycles to the next village where his wife had grown up. There we visited a few of Sailoon's family members, and Akyaar was able to borrow a significant amount from them. He also visited one of his in-laws to whom he had loaned money, and he attempted to get his money back, but the debtor did not have anything to give. As Sailoon's sister fixed tea for us, Akyaar flirted with her, which revolved around the sister offering to put some sugar in his tea, and Akyaar then offering to put some sugar in her tea.

Akyaar was still well short of the amount he needed, so he turned to his old friend who was a rich landowner and businessman. We cycled onto the rich man's property, and I saw that it contained a brick making operation. There were neatly stacked mountains of finished orange and brown bricks the size of school busses. Nearby, there was an area where the bricks were shaped from clay and laid out to dry in the sun. In this area, we found Aandhit and Aasmina working together while Sailoon watched their young child at home. Aandhit had been unsuccessful at securing loans for his half of the brothers' upcoming land purchase, so he and his wife had resorted to taking this job in order to raise the money. They were required to squat in the sun all day long, pushing around piles of mud and brick. They worked from sunup to sundown and each one made slightly more than a rickshaw puller made on average in Delhi, but the work was physically more

demanding than rickshaw pulling. It is possible that the backbreaking labor and exhaustion from working twelve hour shifts in the brickyard contributed to the tension that resulted in Aandhit's suicide attempt that evening. Akyaar and I said hello to Aandhit and Aasmina, and then we pedaled off, across the property, to find the boss.

We met Akyaar's rich friend in the middle of his vast mango orchard where there were random cows and goats grazing, and through which children passed on their way home from school. Akyaar and his friend leaned against the rich man's motorcycle, kicking the dirt, spitting, and talking business. Akyaar secured from his friend a loan for a large sum, nearly equivalent to one thousand US dollars. The loan was interest-free, however about half of it would need to be repaid in labor. They discussed the types of labor that Akyaar could do, and Akyaar persuaded his friend that he would not be able to make bricks because his back and shoulders were giving him trouble. They settled on some easier work in the business of picking and packing mangoes which Akyaar could do the following year. Akyaar's reputation for honesty appeared to be paying off, and the deal that he worked out with his friend would require him to take some months off from rickshaw pulling next year to help box up his friend's mango harvest.

Akyaar and I cycled side by side on the main road, racing and chatting, enjoying the evening. I began wondering if the men ever cycled far outside of their villages. I asked Akyaar how far outside his village he had been before going to Delhi, and he first said that he had only traveled to the nearby city of Malda. But then he asked if I wanted him to include his travels while working on labor gangs that built electric towers around the country. He told me that the work had taken him to Mumbai, Gujarat, Bihar, Patna, Allahabad, and Kerela. Then, five years before we met, he fell from the top of one of the towers and almost died. The company gave him 50,000

rupees as compensation for the accident, and he used it to pay for his medical bills and the medical bills from Sailoon's traffic accident.

Electric tower labor gangs were a major source of employment for men from this region. Sometimes the companies gave labor recruits little choice about where they would work, or how long they could leave the work site to return to their villages. Still, many men saw it as a viable option among their other, imperfect options. A young man about to leave the village on his second tour of building electric towers in Punjab exclaimed, "I want to go to the corners of the earth!" Men told me that the earnings are slightly less than the earnings that are possible from rickshaw pulling, however, they like the fact that some construction companies provide them with housing on the jobsites.

Despite its advantages, it was common for men in the village to have strong feelings against doing labor on electric tower construction gangs: "Well it's dangerous, very dangerous work. They work on very tall towers. I worry a lot." People recognized the dangerous nature of the work, and while I stayed in the village I attended the funeral of a man who had fallen to his death while working on an electric tower construction gang in Bihar. Another problem that men complained about was labor gang supervisors withholding pay. Quite a few rickshaw men in Delhi said that they had been attracted to rickshaw pulling because they had experienced the withholding of their pay at factory or labor gang jobs, whereas no one could withhold their earnings from operating a rickshaw. This is not to imply that most men followed a straight progression from labor gangs to cycle rickshaw pulling. Aandhit, who had also worked on electric tower labor gangs before becoming a rickshaw puller, told me that he was thinking of giving up rickshaw pulling for a while to return to building electric towers. He told me that he just wanted a change of pace. And other men expressed attitudes that made it hard to identify a clear hierarchy of preferences among the

types of work available to poor men in the village: “[cycle rickshaw pulling] is okay, whatever. If I get some other work here in the village, then I’ll stay here for a while. If not, then I’ll go back to [building electric towers] in Gujarat again.” Something that struck me was how the men did not see rickshaw pulling as permanent or exclusive. Even those who had done it for many years did not pigeonhole themselves, rather they kept an eye out for other opportunities.

The men weighed rickshaw pulling and electric tower construction alongside other economic opportunities. Temporary construction jobs in or near their village periodically became available, as did insecure employment in the cities that demanded hard manual labor. Around the village there was a lot of work harvesting and packing mangoes for export. Groups of these workers were seen heading to and from the orchards carrying long bamboo poles that had little hooked baskets on top to catch mangoes from the top branches. This work was seasonal and relatively safe (although men occasionally fell from the trees), but the pay was very low. Some men who returned from rickshaw pulling during the summer months divided their time between mango harvesting and helping with domestic chores or lounging about their homes and *gumna*-ing. There were often other types of agricultural jobs available in the village, as well as odd gigs like helping to build a new stall in the local market or catching fish to sell. Some men invested in more permanent businesses which required startup capital or skills (e.g., barber, taxi driver, food vendor). The village juice vendor formerly pulled a rickshaw in Delhi. Finally, jobs harvesting and planting rice in the Southern part of West Bengal were available, as were jobs in the brick making industry.

Men recognized that breadwinning was their duty, and they tried to fulfill this duty while also tending to a number of investments. The most important of these was usually their children’s education which they hoped would translate to profitable careers and quality marriage matches.

Earlier I mentioned Akyaar's plans for getting his son married, and the other men were similarly focused on cultivating good marriage matches for their children, getting them into good schools, raising or demanding dowries for their marriages, and carrying out elaborate weddings for them. There were other investments that rickshaw men and their families pursued such as buying and cultivating land, raising farm animals like cows, buffalo, and goats, and buying jewelry. One in three rickshaw men in the village owned some land, usually relatively small patches. Aandhit leased two *bigha* (about 0.66 acres) of agricultural land from a local landlord, and Akyaar owned one *bigha* and seven *katha* (about 0.54 acres). They grew lentils, eggplants, bitter gourds, and other squash-like vegetables. In Akyaar's plot there were also several trees including a lemon tree, mango tree, papaya tree, and another type of tree that produced no fruit but was supposedly worth twenty thousand rupees for its wood. Some of the fruits and vegetables were for their household consumption, and the rest would be sold in the local market. Akyaar picked a handful of vegetables from his garden and proudly told me that it was worth fifty rupees. In difficult times, as a last resort, land could be sold to pay for debts, a new home, a wedding, or a dowry.

For laboring class village men, hard manual wage labor and other types of short-term, low paying gig work was easy to find. More secure and better paying jobs were, however, seen as out of reach for most poor men. Of the better types of jobs, government jobs were the most desired. Government police service and railway jobs were always taking applications, and everyone knew so, but one of the problems for most rickshaw men was that they lacked the education to pass the exams that were part of the application process. Most of my informants had not progressed past sixth or seventh grade in school, and this effectively quashed their chances of being eligible for a cushy post in the state bureaucracy. Sanjay, a *Mandal* caste Hindu who pulled a rickshaw from *Taakat Chawk*, was an exception because he had passed tenth grade and was more literate than

most other rickshaw pullers. When he returned from Delhi, he spent time preparing for the exam required to join the police. He passed the exam once, but at that time he was unable to actually join the police force because in addition to passing the exam a large bribe had to be paid to the person in charge of hiring on the police force. The bribe amounted to nearly nine thousand US dollars. As Sanjay again prepared to sit for the entrance exam for the police force, he was consolidating some of his investments and taking out many loans in hopes that he could raise enough to pay the bribe.

I know of no rickshaw men who successfully gained government employment, but Sanjay was actively trying and if he was successful it would put him in an economic class above other rickshaw men. This dissertation has provided evidence of cross-caste cooperation between rickshaw men, but rickshaw men had very few cross-class alliances. Akyaar, who was a childhood friend of Sanjay, reckoned that, “Sanjay...has more education. After he passes the government exams then he will get a good government job. Then he won’t talk to me anymore. He’ll have a good job, he’ll be a rich man. He won’t like to talk to poor men anymore.” “So rich men in your village aren’t supposed to talk with poor men?” “They don’t, but they should.” There were class limits to a village patriarch’s popularity.

5.7 Panchim’s Trip to Find a New Wife

Ahead of our journey to Assam, Panchim and I tried to reserve train tickets at the reservation office in the Malda train station, but we were unsuccessful — the clerk kept telling us that nothing was available. Panchim said that his in-laws had always arranged tickets for him when he used to make the journey with his wife before she died. We ended up settling on a plan to simply

board the train on the following evening and sit down in vacant seats, and then pay for our fares in case the conductor discovered us.

We took a taxi back to the village where Panchim used his bicycle — or his *rajdhani* (fancy express train) as he called it — to run some pre-travel errands. Panchim pedaled while I sat on the goods-carrier rack on the back of the cycle, and I thought as we rattled through the mango orchards that I would remember this as a classic moment in our relationship. Panchim bought a new shirt and underwear in the village market, and as we returned from the market he veered our bumping and squeaking *rajdhani* off the path and into the jungle. Hidden in the trees was a small hut which served as the village liquor store. It sold some Indian brand-name liquor but did the better part of its business in a type of liquor brewed right on the premises. Panchim bought two bottles — one for the moment, and one for the next day's train ride. We sat on plastic chairs outside the store and listened to a troop of macaque monkeys rustle through the bamboo trees high above. Panchim drank and talked about his contributions to his household in the village, mentioning the improvements to the outhouse that he made and the money that he earns. His hiccups began and he was feeling good, so he decided to pop in on some of his relatives. We zigzagged on his *rajdhani* through the mango trees and reached the relatives' home. He stuffed the bottles of liquor under his shirt, but by now he smelled like alcohol and was a little unsteady. Luckily his relatives did not seem to mind, and they served us tea and biscuits and sat us in front of their TV. The news reported that a terrorist had killed eight cyclists in New York, and I did my best to explain that in my country people did not normally ride on the cycle's carrier. I slept at Panchim's house that night, sharing the bed with him. He snored loudly and I lay awake wondering if giant spiders were able to penetrate the mosquito net that enclosed our bed.

The next day, Panchim packed his finest clothes and the remaining bottle of liquor, and we taxied an hour into Malda and boarded our train without any problems. The train was not very crowded, and I was surprised that no one ever asked to see our tickets. Panchim reminded me not to tell anyone in his in-laws' village that he pulls a rickshaw. I asked, "So what do you do then?" "Some secure employment (*naukari*) in Delhi." "What type of *naukari*?" "Oh, some educated person's *naukari* in some office." And his request to not be called a rickshaw puller on this journey seemed fitting as our train approached Siliguri, winding its way around Bangladesh, away from his village, and in the opposite direction of Delhi. We were breaking from the circuit between sending and receiving places that I had often used to make sense of my informants as circular migrants. Late that night, as most passengers slept, there was commotion from the compartment next to ours. The lights were flipped on, a crowd formed, and there was a lot of arguing. A woman had accused a male passenger of groping her. Police arrived and it increasingly seemed from the statements given by the woman and the man whom she accused that the man was guilty. Onlookers began encouraging the police to punish him. From his bunk bed overlooking the scene, Panchim called loudly, "Hit him! Hit him! Hit him!" The man was forced to change seats and that seemed to be the end of it. But in the morning when he disembarked, he was met by several police officers waiting on the platform who led him away, holding his arms. It was a gorgeous day to spend watching the Indian countryside from a train window, and Panchim drank and recounted the times when he worked on electric tower labor gangs in Bhutan. In those days there was a ban on importing any tobacco into Bhutan, and he could not find the brand of *gutka* that he likes in Bhutan, so he concealed bags of his favorite brand in his underwear when he crossed the border. Panchim thought the tea fields that covered Assam's hilly landscape were very beautiful, and I think they were what inspired him to keep speaking about how he used to roam around the mountains of

Bhutan. I imagined him and I rattling along a mountain path on his *rajdhani*. He also reminisced about exploring the tea plantations in Assam with his wife, and he told me how at one time he had become fascinated with taking photographs of the natural beauty.

It was nighttime again when we reached our stop in Assam, just south of Silchar, and from there it took another hour by auto rickshaw to arrive at Panchim's in-laws' house. We greeted them and they welcomed us into their home which was very similar in construction to the homes in which rickshaw men in Panchim's village lived. It was decided that before we slept, we should take a bath. The pump near the house was not working, but it was possible to bathe in a flooded rice paddy field behind the house. The night was balmy and becoming windier. We walked several hundred meters into the fields on raised paths that were covered in grass and mud, and around us the darkness pulsed with the songs of a million frogs. At the edge of the flooded area, we tied towel-like cloths (*lungi*) around our waists and piled our clothes on the edge of the temporary pond. We dumped pitchers of warm water over our heads and fumbled to lather our bodies with soap while keeping the wind from sweeping our clothes across the fields. Light rain mixed with the winds as we dressed, and as we strolled back towards the house Panchim commented with satisfaction that this day marked an entire month that he had not worked. I told him that it seemed that he did not like to work, and he chuckled and agreed. I told him that I do not like working either, and we both laughed. A moment later, he added, "Of course after some time I have to eat, the money gets low, so then I have to work."

Panchim's in-laws gave us a room to sleep in, and the room had one bed that we needed to share. I lay next to Panchim, and he snored loudly and wildly until I could no longer stand it. I peeled back the mosquito net that enclosed the bed and dragged a blanket to the other side of the room. With a few meters of space between us it would be easier to sleep, but without the protection

of the mosquito net I became terrified that there might be giant crawling spiders like the ones in Panchim's village home. I rolled myself in the blanket, mummy style, and wrapped a scarf around my head and face so only my nose stuck out, and nervously, uncomfortably, passed the night lying on the floor.

In the morning, when Panchim found me, I grumbled that I had been trying to avoid his snoring as well as evil arachnids. His response was to tell me that I did not need to be afraid of spiders because even the big ones did not bite. And, as this caused me to remember that once when we were in Delhi, he had told me that he was being haunted there by the ghost of a woman from his village, I pointed out to him that he was afraid of ghosts although they do not bite. The champion snorer did not agree or disagree with my logic, but the mention of ghosts prompted him to tell a story involving magic. Supposedly there was a boy who had an argument with his family in Panchim's village. The boy left his family and ventured out to learn magic in the very area of Assam where Panchim and I were visiting. There the boy stayed with a woman who taught him magic, and he learned how to transform himself into a goat during the day and back into a boy at night. He stayed with the woman for ten or fifteen years, going about life as a goat during the day, and coming home to sleep with his teacher at night. Over time, the young man missed his village in West Bengal, and he missed his family. He returned to his village where his father arranged a marriage for him. The young magician wanted to show his magic to his new wife. Before casting a spell, he filled a pitcher with water and told his wife that if she got scared to pour the water on him and he would turn back into a man. She understood, and in an instant he morphed himself into a buffalo. Witnessing this, his wife threw her arms up in a panic and knocked over the pitcher so there was no water left to pour on her buffalo husband. As a result, he was stuck in the form of a buffalo for the rest of his life. I was absorbed in Panchim's story, but when he concluded I could

not help crying, “Bullshit!” Panchim declared, “I was there, I saw! A thousand men from my village saw it!” “So, you were there when he turned into a buffalo?” “No, but news gets around and people go to see when something interesting happens, so I went. He was a buffalo.” “That was just any old buffalo.” “No, look, a thousand men saw it — ask Akyaar, ask Sunil!” It was pointless to challenge the story further. Panchim was anyway focused on the day ahead. He was dressing in his nicest clothing, including new sneakers, and generously applying perfume to his neck and chest. He was on a mission to find a new wife and he would not be deterred, least of all by an anthropologist’s preconceptions about which events were real, or really mattered.

6.0 Conclusion

One day during the last week of my fieldwork, I was wandering through an enormous indoor modern shopping mall in South Delhi. The mall was air conditioned, had security guards and metal detectors at the doors, and it catered to Delhi's middle and elite classes with expensive western brands. Outside the shops, in the walkways, vendors sold fashion accessories, electronic gadgets, and manicures from small stands. I strolled past a stand covered with sunglasses and wallets and gave a friendly nod to the salesclerk. The clerk beckoned to me and I thought, "Oh no, here we go..." in anticipation of having to deal with a pushy salesman. The clerk persisted and I realized that I knew him; it was Panchim's son, Srinidas, the keyboard master who had previously pulled a rickshaw at *Taakat Chawk*! It had been a while since I had last seen him, when I visited him and his family in his village, and this was the last place I had expected to run into him. He wore a company uniform which I thought looked absurd on him, but even more than the uniform it was the setting of the posh shopping mall which had rendered him almost unrecognizable to me. He grinned at me and the expression that I gave in return must have been similar to the expression that he made the first time he saw me try to operate a cycle rickshaw. But before we could chat, someone who was probably his boss appeared from behind the stand, casting a chill over our reunion. Srinidas busied himself with arranging some sunglasses, and I walked on so as not to get him in trouble. That was the last time I saw him.

My surprise at seeing him in the mall that day had to do with how unexpected it was to see poor migrant men like rickshaw pullers being able to significantly improve their occupational or

material statuses.³³ Structural conditions make any such upward mobility for rickshaw men rather unlikely. Understanding the structural conditions that bind a person is not the same, however, as knowing the person. And I am afraid that my astonishment on that day in the mall was also rooted in a violation of my stubborn expectation that who a rickshaw man is and will be, and what he does and will do, is largely given and knowable through the fact that he operates a rickshaw. If I had been able to interview him in that moment, in my astonishment I would have asked him how a poor migrant laborer like him was able to get a sales position in a swanky mall. Was he also still pulling a rickshaw? Did his boss suspect that he was a rickshaw puller? Was he still staying with his *gaowale* in their dilapidated room near *Taakat Chawk*? Hopefully I would also think to ask him what he did on his lunch break at the mall, whether Delhi girls treat mall clerks well, whether he had made friends with clerks from the other shops, if he had any keyboard gigs scheduled in the village, whether he was still supporting the BJP...

This dissertation has been an exercise in seeing past the man's profession even while trying to understand his work situation. Manual labor, as we may well have suspected from the start, turned out for men like Niza, Aandhit, Akyaar, Manoj, Laxmi, and Pachim to be a vital means to economic survival for themselves and their families, and it was also an important path to achieving dignity as men. Interestingly, the further they traveled along that path, the further they felt they got from meeting the important masculine expectation of remaining sexually fit. In Chapter Two, the antagonism between rickshaw men's breadwinning and their masculine sexual fitness was made clear through a close examination of the embodied experience of their labor performance.

³³ I understand that it is quite possible that elements of the particular mall clerk job in question, including its pay, may have been objectively or subjectively worse than rickshaw pulling, but in Delhi, sales jobs at malls tend to pay more and be less dangerous and stigmatized than rickshaw pulling, and this is what led me to assume that Srinidas's new job was a step up.

Embedded within the men's labor (non)performance was an ethos of sexual culture. The men did not at the beginning of the workday become workers who suspended their masculine ideals of sexual fitness (although the opposite may obtain as, according to one of my interlocutors, "there are plenty of fuckers who abandon their work"). Through rickshaw pullers' labor I began to learn about them as men and, at the same time, their aspirations to remain sexually fit provided a richer perspective on their worktime (in)activities. Inactivity and goofing off can speak to more than someone's personality or their resistance to, or benefit from, economic exploitation, and this topic deserves more research. Along these lines, a critical re-examination of the movement that consisted of women's strikes for fair wages and refusals of sexual or domestic labor appears worthwhile; those fights for economic and gender equality, I suspect, contain traces of aspirations for gendered ways of being beyond "equality," which may be culturally particular and separate from, and possibly in conflict with, women's positions as workers. Kathi Weeks (2011) has revisited second-wave feminists' arguments for wages for housework in order to recuperate a strand of autonomist Marxist thought, and she challenges readers to imagine what life would be like if more non-work time were available, as well as to see the ways that anti-productivist "Utopias" are already sprouting. I challenge us, additionally, to notice when our gender ideologies and gendered ways of being render us averse to participating in production for production's sake. The gendered nature of productivism has been well elaborated in studies of the gendered division of labor within models of capitalism that are premised on heterosexuality and patriarchy, and in terms of male breadwinning and female reproductive labor. The gendered nature of anti-productivism has been more elusive but understanding it will be important for the continued struggle to chart post-work paths to dignity.

With regard to the rickshaw men's labor performance, their creativity deserves mentioning. The flexibility and mobilization of the *mandaa* discourse is an example of their creativity. So is the way that they made their own workday schedules and paced themselves to avoid drying out. Attempting to pace oneself in one's labor activity could be thought of as basic self-preservation, but when productivism is so popularly celebrated and deeply ingrained then countering it really does require the invention of a new relationship with labor activity. The cycle rickshaw men postulated and described a relationship between their labor and sexual performances, incorporating folk ideas about the body's energy consumption. It is often assumed that so-called "unskilled" and manual labor is mindless. I lost count of how many people in Delhi assured me that rickshaw pullers are simple and stupid. Should we consider rickshaw pullers as an overlooked creative class? I do not know, but I do think that it is not incorrect to say that their creativity has been classed out of the conversation. The ability to create activities and social spaces according to one's own moral determination is a key indicator of fuller, "multi-dimensional" humanity because it moves beyond a stunted type of engagement with the world that is encapsulated by the aphorism, "I'm just doing my job" (Bamyeh 2009, 149-153). What I found was that my informants were creatively constituting their labor to realize, as far as possible, multiple masculine ideals.

The lives of rickshaw men refute the stereotype of the asexual migrant worker (see Ahmad 2009, 310) not only in their obsessions with keeping their jobs from destroying their sexually fitness, but also in the ways they explored, carried on, and fantasized about a variety of intimate relationships with women at both ends of their migration circuits, as described in Chapter Three. Thick descriptions in the academic literature of rickshaw men's sexuality and romantic attachments are very hard to find. However, I have shown that their different types of intimate relationships combined to support their labor migration, and therefore also the industry of cycle

rickshaw pulling. The men's sexual and romantic attachments with their wives were a factor in their labor migration patterns, and their workday routines and their interactions with customers were also shaped by eroticism and fantasy. Furthermore, their romantic escapades extended outside the geographical binary of sending and receiving places as we saw with Panchim who traveled to Assam to find a new wife. A study of the men that is limited to their circular labor migration would exclude Panchim's journey to the Northeast for romance, and in that case it would miss a chance to illustrate the life for which the worker worked and saved. Saving to go on dates, or for a travel vacation, seems so self-evidently vital to my own story as a worker and a hopeful person, so why has the academic literature condemned rickshaw pullers to the singular drudgery of returning to their villages to "subsidize the reproduction of their labor"? A takeaway from my research should be that rickshaw pullers — whose economic situations social scientists do not hesitate to dissect in full detail — also practiced intimate relationships that were as complex, multiple, fulfilling, and fraught with inequalities and (im)possibilities as are yours and mine.

More research needs to be conducted on the rickshaw men's intimate, erotic, and sexual relationships. This should include research on their homosexual and homoerotic relationships, and whether and how they imagine the sex that they have, especially in Delhi, is related to their labor performance and the somatic condition of drying out. The rickshaw men's roles and functions in the sex trade — as consumers, workers, pimps, touts, infrastructure providers, and critics — deserve further academic attention. Such explorations would contribute to the efforts of other scholars to describe the intersection of migrant workers' sexuality and class (e.g., George 2006; Srivastava 2007; Parry 2014; Kwon 2015), and they hold a potential to help dispel totalizing myths like the theory of South Asian male personality that hinges on semen anxiety (see Carstairs 1957; Kakar 1978). Likewise, research in this direction could help cut down to size certain South Asian

“heritage” masculinities that are constructed through colonialism or a historical accretion of nationalistic and communal prejudices (think of “the threatening male Muslim” or the “the criminal male tribal”), and which then get unreflectively mapped onto contemporary situations (see Srivastava 2007, 16-23). The homogenizing grand theories of South Asian masculinity and sexuality need to be challenged by the ethnographic evidence from every corner and strata of contemporary life, and while Chapter Three of this dissertation mounts one such challenge, there is room to build off it. The intimate practices described in Chapter Three may be too unruly, too diverse for grand theorizing, but they all suggest that analytics like “proletariat” or “footloose labour” do a representational injustice to the multifaceted and diverse realities of poor men’s lives in South Asia.

I have stressed the uniqueness and complexity of the men who helped me with my research, but I do not want this to be mistaken to mean that rickshaw men are exceptionally atomized, individualistic, or self-reliant. Male homosocial solidarity, friendship, and support are crucial to every rickshaw man’s existence in Delhi. Chapter Four showed how rickshaw men did not participate in such social support with just any men in Delhi, but instead concentrated it among other rickshaw pullers with whom they shared a common village of origin. This *gaowala* masculinity was the backbone of work culture, and while in Delhi it variously imposed, intensified, and challenged norms and restrictions derived from village life, these urban adaptations in turn reverberated in social practice in the village. Poor migrant workers sought the support they needed from people with whom they had established trust prior to migration, and with whom they shared a common village background. Because the men equated the practice of this support to being good men, it reinforced my conviction that masculinity was the most consistently important theme in the men’s lives and therefore should serve as the basis for my anthropological representation of

them. The men's homosocial relationships of support and camaraderie with their fellow villagers in Delhi were constantly being practiced in one form or another so that every man's labor migration was, in a way, the achievement of all his *gaowale*.

An important context for the *gaowala* relationships was the lack of protection, respect, and material support that the men received from institutions and the wider population in Delhi. The character of the *gaowala* relationships does not presuppose such abandonment or hostility from broader society, nor does an uncaring society and state necessarily lead to the formation of these types of small mutual aid groups. But the rickshaw men who I studied were, at least, achieving a meager level of safety and comfort for one another which was needed because no one else had provided it for them, and which would have been difficult to find elsewhere. There were a few formal cycle rickshaw unions in Delhi, as mentioned earlier, and a comparative study between the precarity and solidarity among the members of these unions and non-unionized rickshaw pullers would be very interesting. Finally, I want to underline the fact that it was through studying and participating in *gaowala* masculinity as much as possible that I built rapport with my informants and gained access to ethnographic data. Although the rickshaw men's mutual aid groups were insular, the golden ticket for entry for ethnographers and tea sellers alike was participating in friendship and support with the men as opposed to being from their village.

Each chapter has highlighted different ways in which rickshaw men's masculinity overlaps, shapes, and exists beyond, their work. It would be a mistake to imagine that the practices described in a particular chapter were separate from the practices described in other chapters, as if a rickshaw man gave attention to his breadwinning duties and after that was done he might turn his attention to his *gaowale* relationships. In reality, the behaviors described in one chapter were often combined with those described in another chapter. Manoj's anti-productivist tendencies

manifested as ogling Delhi girls and visiting brothels, and many of the men slacked off through horseplay and shared tea breaks with their *gaowale*. Furthermore, I conceptualized a set of the rickshaw pullers' close relationships in Delhi as heterosexual intimate relationships in Chapter Three, and another set as homosocial friendships in Chapter Four, but the reality was that the two sets shared some key qualities; the men's relationships with women were often marked with friendship and involved treating and the navigation of caste rules, while their *gaowale* bonds were sometimes tender, romantic, and erotic. Sometimes a number of masculine routines were evident at once like when Sunil and Akyaar would dawdle away the workday by cuddling in the back of a rickshaw while they shared cigarettes and tea. The ways of being and becoming proper men that are described in any given chapter were complimentary and overlapping with those described in the other chapters, and it was no big deal for the men to walk and chew gum or, as it were, to slack off and share tobacco.

My fieldwork was conducted over a relatively short amount of time (about 24 months spread out during five years), so I was unable to observe the span of rickshaw men's careers, and it was difficult to see how the men may have changed their orientation to their work along the way. Longer-term fieldwork would show the unfolding and evolution of the men's careers. And then there are the careers of the relevant masculinities to consider. My study was not strongly grounded in history, and while I believe that can be an asset as much as a weakness so far as it avoids the tyranny of colonial or "heritage" masculine tropes and the facile projecting of past cultures onto a contemporary population, more research on the historical iterations of South Asian masculinities such as male breadwinning and friendships among village men might stir up interesting connections. One area of rickshaw men's masculinity that I neglected was that of what being a good son involves, and that is an example of a conversation with rickshaw men that needs to be

expanded in the future. While the theme of masculinity is central to every rickshaw man's life, it disturbs me that in framing rickshaw pullers' lives as masculine undertakings, I probably downplayed or negated other identities or narratives that are also very important for accurately presenting their lives. In an attempt to partially correct that problem, some of the ethnographic narratives were presented with details that are superfluous to a narrow study of masculinity, but that can encourage alternate interpretations and representations. My dissertation reflects decisions that I made about what aspects of the rickshaw men's lives to emphasize, and it is also the product of an approach that relied mostly on qualitative data. In focusing exclusively on qualitative indicators, the trade off, obviously, is that statistical or quantitative conclusions cannot be drawn. I meant to humanize my interlocutors and I was afraid that turning them into numbers could be deeply counterproductive to that goal, but that is not to say that anthropologists should not be curious about the average number of weeks of a rickshaw man's migration cycle, the amount per month that Bengalis versus Biharis spend on sex workers in Delhi, or whether the population of rickshaw pullers in Delhi is growing or shrinking.³⁴ The right kind of quantitative analysis could nicely supplement my research, and would have the potential to strengthen or help refute some of the conclusions that I have drawn.

Despite its limitations, this dissertation contributes a thick description of rickshaw pullers as gendered people, and such a description was, until now, unavailable in the academic literature. Masculine projects including breadwinning, homosocial friendships, and intimate heterosexual relationships were shown to influence the labor performance and shape the labor migration experience of rickshaw pulling, and they also continued beyond it. The masculine current of

³⁴ Kurosaki et al. (2007 & 2012) provides the best available quantitative data on rickshaw pullers, including demographic and economic numbers.

breadwinning, for example, was the primary objective for rickshaw men in Delhi. And it was a masculine project that continued even when they were not pedaling rickshaws, as they hustled to earn money and nurture investments when they returned to their villages. Categories for social research that focus on occupations — e.g., “rickshaw puller,” “boatman,” “taxi driver,” “priest,” “factory worker,” “migrant worker,” “farmer,” etcetera — can be handy starting points, but we should be suspicious when they are allowed to serve as master narratives or bookends for representations of people’s lives. And even the category of breadwinner would be a rather thin, two-dimensional way to understand the men who I studied. With only a few exceptions, my interlocutors exhibited masculinities and aspirations to become men which were rather disconnected from their statuses as economic actors. Their masculinities were multi-faceted, and their nonproductive masculine aspirations frequently inconvenienced or redirected their productive ones. If I had failed to grasp this, then I may still have understood various things about rickshaw pulling, for example as an infrastructure, a sector of employment, an icon of exploitation or Orientalism, or a feature of daily life in urban North India, but I would have understood very little about, and probably misunderstood, the men pedaling the rickshaws. It would be terrific if my approach can be used in future studies to provide deeper, more accurate representations of people grouped in other occupations, and to render more nuanced pictures of the complicated and culturally particular nature of gender and how it shapes their lives. But if this dissertation does nothing more than to encourage readers to appreciate cycle rickshaw men as complex people then it will have been worth it.

I chose masculinity as a theme to demonstrate that cycle rickshaw men are more than just migrant laborers, because it became salient through my interviews and observations. It was appealing to me as an organizing theme for my study because while it was fairly ubiquitous in

various forms throughout the men's lives, it still retained some specificity and traction in theoretical analysis. It was not, however, the only option for demonstrating my overall point that rickshaw men are not simply workers at a quirky type of job. The rickshaw men are people with many cares and identities, and their masculinity should be taken as just one very good example of how their jobs do not encompass their humanity. Whenever these types of examples are discovered, they should be held up and elaborated to stave off further encroachment by a work-centric vision of human worth.

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