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SANITIZING SOCIALITY: OWNED LIVELIHOODS,

EMBEDDED ECONOMIES AND SOCIAL WEALTH AMONG DELHI'S SANITATION

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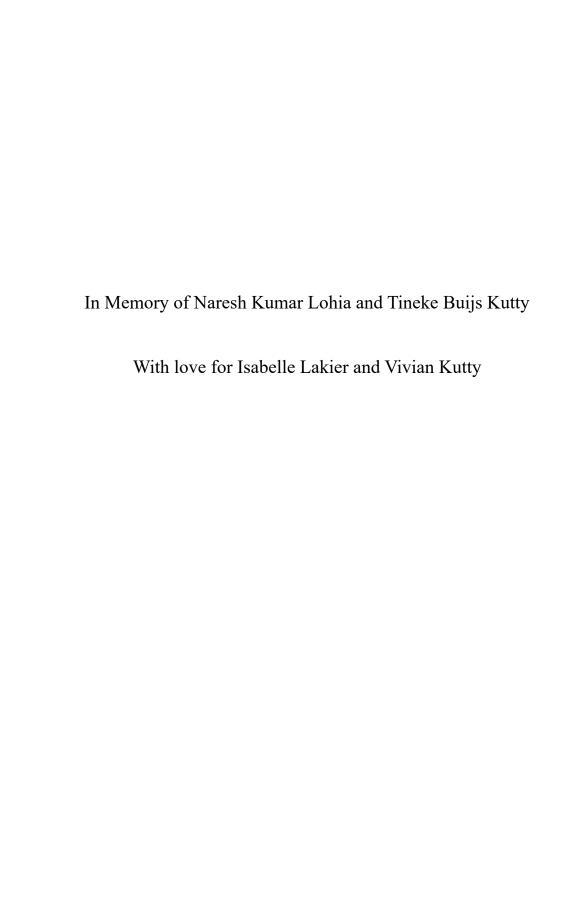

BY

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In Memory of Naresh Kumar Lohia and Tineke Buijs Kutty

With love for Isabelle Lakier and Vivian Kutty

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Low-income and socially marginalized people around the world regularly engage in anti-competitive practices. Often illegal and always offensive to those with faith in free markets, these practices rarely help the poor in general. They are, however, often tied to violence against other marginalized people and the obstruction of efficient public services, which can, in many cases, exacerbate the problems of the poor even further. How should we interpret such anti-market behavior? In this dissertation, I address this question through a case study of Delhi's Balmiki community, a caste that is traditionally associated with sanitation-related work in northern India. Members of this caste, who are frequently referred to as "sweepers" or *safai karamcharis,* make up the vast majority of Delhi's sanitation workforce. I show that the social life of this community is deeply permeated by anti-market social practices. Sometimes invisible to the state and sometimes a direct challenge to its authority, these practices help the Balmikis secure a sense of security in an otherwise precarious socio-economic landscape. Most salient among these practices is what I call "proprietary livelihood:" a system in which people effectively own their jobs rather than sell their labor on a market. In the first three chapters of this dissertation, I show how both informal and formal sector sanitation workers own their livelihoods, how their practices are similar to older forms of social organization in India and elsewhere, how their owned livelihoods constitute embedded and transparently social forms of wealth, and also how they use proprietary livelihood to protect themselves from the otherwise prevailing condition of expropriated freedom – a fundamentally modern/capitalist condition in which people's material sustenance is separated from other aspects of their social lives. In the fourth chapter, I show how the practices of proprietary livelihood are intertwined with the anti-market practices of other members of the Balmiki community, specifically, a leader of organized crime and his political associates. In Chapter 5, I show how the practices of proprietary livelihood come into direct conflict with the bourgeois desires of upper-middle class homeowners to have "neat and clean" neighborhoods. In that same chapter, I also show how homeowner associations act as agents of proletarianization by subjecting the informal sanitation workers to the disciplinary processes of wage labor – processes that simultaneously destroy the transparently social nature of the sanitation workers' wealth.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I critically engage the language that mainstream economists would use to conceptualize proprietary livelihood and the other forms of transparently social wealth found among Delhi's Balmiki community. Mainstream economists would categorize these practices as forms of "rent extraction" and "rent seeking," and they would argue that they introduce inefficiencies into Delhi's sanitation system. I point out that this view would indeed be consistent with their neo-classical framework, but I go on to argue that the concept of rent itself – in both its classical and neo-classical formulations – is used

to designate and domesticate transparently social forms of work and wealth that would otherwise disturb the economists' worldview in which rational actors seek utility. I pursue this line of inquiry as part of a broader belief that we anthropologists should engage the terms and concepts of neoclassical economists more directly than we have thus far, not because they are correct, but because their dominance in the public sphere reflects the real-world dominance of the commodity form.

In the process of making these arguments, I suggest three lines of further inquiry for anthropologists: (1) that we explore the possible existence of proprietary livelihood and similar forms of transparently social wealth in other contexts; (2) that we should pay a little less attention to wages, capital and commodities and consider for a while the role of rent in the everyday lives of people around the world (how they pay it, avoid it, extract it, and seek it); (3) that we should frame our inquiries in light of the condition of expropriated freedom, a condition that now prevails in almost every corner of the world.

Introduction

This dissertation presents an ethnographic study of sanitation workers in early twenty-first century Delhi. Because the vast majority of sanitation workers in India belong to a caste community known as the Balmiki Samaj, this dissertation also looks at some aspects of that of that larger community. This project does not attempt to be a historical, political or demographic study of Delhi's sanitation workers as a general population. Rather, it endeavors to use ethnographic evidence to highlight particular types of hidden economic relationships that affect the delivery of sanitation services in the city. It was through the process of conducting my fieldwork that I realized that many if not most of the sanitation workers in Delhi were participating in anti-market or anti-competitive labor practices. In some cases, they were doing this of their own volition while in other cases they were caught in more complicated and more coercive circumstances. In none of the relevant cases were the workers selling their labor as a commodity. Along with these discoveries came the further realization that much of the community's material wealth took a form that was not commodity wealth. With these findings in mind, I formulated the hypothesis that the middle class and bourgeois struggle to improve sanitation and environmental services in early twenty-first century Delhi was also a struggle to commodify the labor of the sanitation workers. The process of commodifying their labor, as I

will argue in this dissertation, was also a process of destroying a very substantial portion of the social wealth of their community. It is this hypothesis that forms the main argument of this dissertation.

The Focal Points of this Project

It should be clear from the foregoing that the sociality of wealth and the commodification of labor among Delhi's sanitation workers will be the primary focus of this dissertation and that topics pertaining to waste, sanitation and the environment will be secondary concerns. But, because I will be doing a case study of a group of people who labor for the sake of sanitation and the environment, the observations and conclusions of this project will, I hope, make a useful contribution to the anthropological literature on those topics. By taking a deep dive into the social relations in which some of these workers are embedded, this study will hopefully provide useful points of comparison for researchers whose main focal points are waste, sanitation and the environment.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the study of waste and sanitation has emerged as a major subfield within qualitative environmental studies. Evidence of its newfound importance can be seen in the recent publication of introductory books that treat waste and related issues as fields of study. *The Routledge Handbook of Waste Studies (Gille and Lepawsky 2022)* and MIT Press's *Discard Studies (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022)* both try to define their fields while also acting as surveys of the literature within the fields.   Multiple histories of sanitation in nations of the Global North have been produced recently (Ashenburg 2007;

Eveleigh 2002; Hoy 1995; Laporte 2000; Melosi 2005; 2008; O'Brien 2008; Vigarello and

Birrell 1988) and so have a few concerning nations of the Global South (Basil Hans 2021; Bisen

2019; Newman 2023). As interesting and important as these studies are, they do not have much

bearing on the labor of sanitation in early twenty-first century Delhi because they do not address

the specific ways in which labor is bought and sold.

Any anthropological work that concerns itself with waste, garbage or dirt would be

remiss if it didn't mention Mary Douglas's classic discussion of the issue. Dirt, she wrote "is not

an independent, objective attribute of something, but a "residual category [of things] rejected

from our normal scheme of classifications" (Douglas 1966, 45). Some scholars have criticized

Douglas's theory from phenomenological (Lagerspetz 2018) and vaguely Marxist (Campkin

2007; W. A. Cohen 2005) perspectives but those scholars still basically uphold her theorization.

I find it nearly impossible to disagree with Douglas's main point that dirt is "matter out of place,"

although I do think that we also need to take into account Bataille's and Kristeva's theories that

humans are drawn to the dirty and disgusting in the same moment that they are repulsed by it.

While Douglas's argument is persuasive, her functionalist/symbolic approach does need to be

historicized and her argument contextualized. She may be right that dirt is always a disruption of

normal systems of classification and she may also be right that the designation of the dirty is

utterly relative, but what she fails to account for is that *the way* that dirt gets put into its proper

place will vary tremendously under different socio-economic relations.

In a capitalist economy, commodities are things of that people want to take ownership of.

Such things are said to have value, *positive* value. Dirt, waste and garbage are, on the other

hand, things that people want to relinquish their ownership of.   They are things of *negative*

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value, things that people will pay to have removed. Their removal requires labor and capital and therefore entails wages and (potentially) profit. Their disposal (i.e., their storage) requires space (e.g., land) and therefore entails rent. These thing of negative value, these anti-commodities, are what we call dirt, waste, garbage, etc. Most commodities become anti-commodities at some point, but some retain an amount of positive value, which means that they can have positive value for some and negative value for others. Recyclables, compostables and pre-owned (but still usable) goods would all be intermediary commodities of this type (see my discussion of the recycling literature below). All of these topics would be interesting to explore further but in the current work I will focus heavily on the labor dimension of anti-commodities and, in an oblique way, on the rent dimension as well. In other words, this dissertation will not be looking at differences in what is considered "matter out of place" but at differences in *what is done* with such matter.

Because I will be conducting a detailed review of the literature on Indian sanitation labor in Chapter 1, I will focus here on the relatively recent literature on sanitation workers who live in other parts of the world. I have found that most of this literature looks at people who are laboring under very different conditions than those described in this dissertation. For example, numerous scholars have done ethnographic studies of informal recyclers (O'Hare 2022; Millar 2018; Nguyen 2019; Wikman 2013) and virtually all of them conclude that those workers draw their livelihood from what Patrick O'Hare calls a "waste commons" (O'Hare 2022, 3), which refers to the unowned supply of recyclable materials that contained among the non-recyclable garbage. To the extent that the workers I observed in Delhi conducted informal recycling, they did not draw their recyclables from a commons but rather from privately owned sources. To the

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extent that the topic of wealth comes up in these studies, it figures as commodified wealth that has been acquired from "remaking" or "revalorizing" waste into new things with new market values (Alexander and Reno 2012; Bear 2012; Crang et al. 2012; Nguyen 2019, 167; Saethre 2020; M. Thompson 1979). In some of the most important areas of their lives, the workers described in this dissertation are not exchanging things with market values but are, as I will show, acting against the dominant set of relationships upon which such exchanges are predicated. Other studies have looked at the thoroughly commodified labor of formal sector sanitation workers of large cities of the Global North (Nagle 2013; Perry 1978; Reid 1991; Sen 2015) but they have not taken on the issue of commodified labor directly. I will show that even the formal municipal workers of Delhi were not genuinely selling their labor as a commodity.   A study of Cape Town sanitation workers examines the perpetuation of racial oppression among their casualized (but still thoroughly commodified) labor relations (Miraftab 2004). I will show that, although caste oppression is definitely perpetuated by Delhi's sanitation system, caste communities also make up the backbone of a form of resistance to capitalism and modernity.[1]

Neoliberalism and precariousness are regularly referenced in the literature mentioned above as important causes and effects in the lives of sanitation workers. In my fieldsite, neoliberalism was not a particularly strong factor, although the threat of privatization was widely feared and caused people to cling more strongly to their social wealth. Neoliberal ideology did also obliquely shape middle class attempts to discipline the sanitation workers that I describe in Chapter 5. Precariousness will be a major topic in this work but I agree with Millar's point that, in the Global South, precariousness is not peculiar to the neoliberal phase of development policy

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[1] The relationship between capitalism and modernity will be discussed in more detail below.

(Millar 2018, 70). I will frame the issue of precariousness in a modified version of the Marxist concept of expropriation (Marx 1976, 880-894).

Another feature of the anthropological literature on waste and sanitation is that it regularly invokes Foucault's concept of biopower (Alexander and Reno 2012; Bear 2012; Chalfin 2020; Oberg 2019; Kruger 2020). Unfortunately, it seems to forget Foucault's own observation that biopower and disciplinary power are very much combined (Foucault 1980, 1:146). If biopower is the "administration of bodies and calculated management of life" (ibid, 140), it can only realize itself through discipline, that is, through getting lots of people to follow lots of rules (through a process of internalization). It isn't always citizens who have to follow the rules, however. A typical modern government does not, for example, penalize ordinary citizens for breaking its dietary or immunization guidelines, but such a government might penalize the armies of health workers who are charged with encouraging people to follow its guidelines if they are unsuccessful in doing so. Their jobs are governed by rules that stipulate the ways that the workers should promote healthy eating and immunization habits among the general population; failing to follow those rules by the government workers would lead to termination (at least in any well-functioning bureaucracy). When it comes to sanitation, ordinary citizens are themselves required to follow the pertinent rules, and, moreover, various workers are charged with enforcing those rules. The process of enforcement, in turn, requires the enforcers to follow another set of rules pertaining to the enforcement of the first set of rules (and so on and so on). Seeing it in this light, I would argue that biopower is really just Foucault's name for a disciplinary power that is oriented toward the facilitation of biological life. In contrast to most Foucualdians, I would further argue that we shouldn't treat it as anything more than that.

In this dissertation, I hope to steer the literature on waste, sanitation and the environment back to more classic Weberian and Marxist questions regarding capitalism and modern society: questions regarding commodification, expropriation, proceduralization, legal-bureaucratic authority and the like. I also hope to revive the questions regarding resistance to modernity[2] and capitalism that were so eloquently raised by the scholars associated with the subaltern studies school of thought.

Aside from facilitating biological life, rules regarding sanitation and the environment also perform a more typically bourgeois function: the separation of public from private space (sometimes intentionally and sometimes not). Both sets of rules force easements onto private property in order to protect public property. They may, for example, mandate that people have a particular kind of exhaust systems in their cars or a particular kind of sewer connection in their homes. Though environmental rules may cover more general objects (e.g. the air) and more general aims (e.g. global climate), environmental rules and sanitary rules are both similar in so far as they are aimed at the production of public goods – climate stability, public health, tidy neighborhoods and the like. The restrictions placed upon both private and public property are aimed at facilitating the production of public goods in *all* spaces, public and private. In doing so they reinforce the modern framework that all space is owned either by private citizens or by the public at large; no space in modern society is supposed to be unowned. Under these sets of rules, private and public space are both equally governed even though the difference between the two is still thoroughly maintained. We will see in this dissertation that many Delhi-ites, concerned with the deadliness and the unsightliness of their public areas, were eager to see such rules enforced.

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[2] As will become clear below, my usages of the terms "modern" and "modernity" are not in any way meant to denote current or contemporary society.

The Interconnections between Capitalism, Modernity, Space and Wealth

The merits of a place are very often judged by the cleanliness and order of its public

spaces. If they are clean and well maintained, conclusions about the wealth and virtue of the

place's government and inhabitants are made. If they are dirty and in disrepair, different

conclusions are made. This happens within countries as well as between them and within cities

as well as between them. We will see in Chapter 5 that upper-middle class residents of Delhi

were very concerned about the appearances of their neighborhoods. We will also see that in one,

low-income neighborhood in which sanitation workers lived, the everyday practices of waste

disposal were very different from what most of Delhi's (and the world's) wealthier residents

would expect and desire. Food scraps and all the other things of negative value were regularly

thrown onto the streets, alleys and other unowned places. Public urination was common,

especially by men. When I was first dropped off at this neighborhood, my auto-rickshaw driver

looked at me with a disgusted visage and said, "What a dirty colony!" (*bahut gandi colony hai*)."

In his 1991 article on public cleanliness, Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that many Indians

tended to divide their space between *inside* and *outside* rather than *public* and *private*

(Chakrabarty 2002, 69). Chakrabarty argued that Indians treated their "inside" spaces, such as

their homes, as places of not only familiarity and safety but also of purity and order (ibid, 70).

They were thus places in which cleanliness of all types was vital. "Outside" spaces consisted of

places like streets and markets which were associated with ambiguity and danger but also

amusement and transgressive pleasure (ibid, 74). Outside spaces were also spaces that were "not

subject to a single set of (enclosing) rules and rituals defining a community" (ibid 73). Because

of their unruly heterogeneity, outside spaces were spaces where people could dump garbage, relieve themselves and do other dirty things without a sense that they were harming anyone else.

We might extrapolate a bit from Chakrabarty's argument to point out that the inside/outside dichotomy also resists the empty, homogeneous space of modern maps (Anderson 1983; Gregory 1994). The latter concept of space asks observers to imagine themselves looking back down upon themselves from an Archimedean point suspended far above the Earth (Arendt 1998, 322). Only from such a vantage point can one lay out land and sea on a cartographer's grid of Cartesian coordinates. The inside/outside dichotomy, by contrast, keeps one anchored in the subjective perspective of the viewer; from one's home, the outside extends infinitely outward to all the surrounding space. Such a subject-centered space is inherently heterogeneous because one's own inside space has more value than the rest. Moreover, the outside to one's home might become the inside of the neighborhood, which has a different set of rules and values than one's home but is nevertheless an inside relative to some other outside, that of the city, the *desh* or what have you. And in all of these shifting outsides, there would exist the protected pockets of other people's insides: *their* homes and *their* neighborhoods which must be treated differently than an outside space but within which you would be an outsider. The people in those other homes would have a similar subject-centered cognitive map (Jameson 1988) of their own, and, so, all the different perspectives would overlap in a living forest of heterogeneity. This particular practice of space, which is by no means unique to India, involves overlapping and competing rules and values and is thus inherently heterogeneous.

As Chakrabarty pointed out, the inside/outside practice of space was a problem for British colonial ambitions of public health and public order (Chakrabarty 2002, 77). These concerns of

a modern state necessitated that it look at its territory as if it were standing on that Archimedean point. It also required the state to arrange its space along a public/private division rather than an inside/outside division. To clarify a point, an individual's *concept* of space is not what is at stake here. Even in the cleanest countries in the world, not everyone is going to hold the empty, homogeneous concept of space and not everyone is going to consciously divide their spaces between public and private. Far more important than the *concepts* that they hold in their heads are the practices they enact with their bodies. A modern state can never really know if it has gotten people to accept its ideas; it can only know if it has gotten people to act *as if* they have (Chakrabarty 2000, 54; Žižek 1989, 22). The latter project requires discipline.

Foucauldian analyses of colonial modernizing projects have helped track the ways in which governments try to discipline people to modern practices of space. Paul Rabinow's *French Modern* (Rabinow 1989) and Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt ([1989] 1991)* are among the classic examinations of how the projects of urban planning, public health and sanitation necessitated a disciplining of colonized peoples to the rules of modern space. Mary Poovey added an important nuance to these accounts in her textual analysis of similar discourses in nineteenthnineteenth ccentury Britain. By bringing Henri Lefebvre's Marxist theories of space (Lefebvre 1991) to bear on her otherwise Foucauldian analysis, Poovey takes a step toward illuminating Foucault's greatest blind spot: the relationship between the rise of discipline as a "technology of power" (Foucault 1979, 194) and the coeval rise of capital as a productive force. For Poovey, concerns of discipline and concerns of commodification, fetishization, surplus value, etc. are inextricable (Poovey 1995, 30). True to the spirit of Lefebvre, Poovey does not allow the Marxist analysis to become a simple story of one class exploiting another. While

Poovey was clear that the primary agents of this project were factory owners, the state and the well-to-do, and while she was also clear the primary objects of intervention were the poor, she treated these projects as part of the broader project of implementing "the modern form of abstraction," of which the "production of abstract space" was a major part (Poovey 1995, 25). Poovey also made the case that the abstracting conceptual framework of modernity could never succeed in its totalizing ambition (ibid., 26) because minds are never as docile as bodies (Mitchell 1991, 95). For Poovey, then, the production of abstract space (through projects of sanitation, public health and public order) was also the production of rule-following bodies.

Similar perspectives arise in other Foucauldian approaches to sanitation (Biza et al. 2022; Carrera 2014), development (J. Ferguson 1990; A. Gupta 2012), and the environment (Dean 1999; Agrawal 2005). True to the Foucauldian spirit, all of these works see power as a productive force rather than a simply repressive one (Foucault 1980), but, as sophisticated as these analyses are, they nevertheless overlook a very simple relationship between discipline and capitalism: that the disciplining of the population and the space it inhabits requires groups of workers who must also follow a certain set of modern rules. Foremost among these workers are those authorized to use violence for the purpose of enforcing rules (e.g., the police). Along with them are the various categories of bureaucrats tasked with rule enforcement through the power of authorization. Then there are the workers, such as the sanitation workers of this study, who are charged with controlling all the non-human (Lemke 2015; Nimmo 2008) stuff that can't ever be disciplined – the water, the garbage, the animals, etc. Biopower can only exist through agencies that are reliant upon all three types of workers, workers who must themselves be disciplined to a certain set of rules.

We will see in Chapter 5 that the lack of a disciplined sanitation workforce was perceived by middle class organizations to be the biggest single obstacle to achieving good sanitation in their neighborhoods. As we shall see in Chapter 2, the workforces that were formally and informally charged with providing sanitation services in Delhi had a lot of autonomy over their work. They had such autonomy precisely because they were resisting the commodification of their labor and were thus not susceptible to the disciplinary mechanisms of the market; they could not be hired and fired.

The power over employment is a powerful disciplinary tool in any modern/capitalist context. As Max Weber observed, "free labour and the complete appropriation of the means of production create the most favorable conditions for discipline" (Weber 1964 pp. 246-8). Such was definitely the case in early twenty-first century Delhi, where the meager provisions afforded by the ration cards were often practically inaccessible to people and where few people owned any substantial property let alone the means of production. Because a lack of paid work could easily transform perennial squalor into life-threatening deprivation, the power to hire or fire was a very great power.

Because of the weakness of Foucauldian terminology in grasping the connection between wage-labor and modern discipline (and biopower) and, indeed, any connection between state agencies and economic conditions, I am framing this dissertation primarily in Marxist terms. The framework of this dissertation is drawn from a panoply of late twentieth-century Marxist sociological and historical scholars who emphasize the importance of commodification, fetishization and abstraction. This group includes David Held (1980), Henri Lefebvre (1991), Patrick Murray (2000), Moishe Postone (1993)(1993) and Derek Sayer (Sayer 1991). Critical

geographers, the Birmingham School and the Frankfurt school also help form the theoretical background of this dissertation as do other thoughtful readers of Marx such as Terry Eagleton, Georg Lukács, I.I. Rubin, Michael Taussig, Raymond Williams and Slavoj Žižek. I choose the theoretical insights of these thinkers because they allow us to talk about material wealth as it is formed in what we broadly call "modern society" and thus also allow us to shift the focus away from the extraction of surplus value and other obviously economic topics. Such a move is vital when talking about topics like the environment and sanitation, both of which have more complicated dynamics of profit than private industry (to the extent that they have them at all).

The basic line of argumentation that I am distilling from this late-twentieth century trend in Marxist thinking is that "modern society" and "capitalist society" are essentially synonyms for one another. I realize that this claim is counter-intuitive to many and so I beg the reader's patience. Much of the social phenomena that I will be describing in this dissertation do not fit into any standard definition of modernity. The literature on modernity and modernization is as vast as it is multidisciplinary, and so a full review of it is beyond the scope of this work. I do think, however, that it is safe to say that most people who would use terms like "modernity" and "modern society" would use them to refer to societies that are characterized by pervasive systems of mass production, bureaucracy, and (ostensibly) impartial legal processes. To bring these together under one descriptor implies that these institutions all have a common feature and that that feature distinguishes "modern" societies from "pre-modern" or "non-modern" ones. What is this feature?

For Anthony Giddens the common feature was what he calls "disembedding mechanisms," which are institutions and practices that "remove social relations from the

immediacies of context" (Giddens 1990, 28).   Everyday systems of expertise, such as medicine

and automotive engineering, are types of specifically modern disembedding mechanism (ibid.,

27) but so is money because, as he argues, it is a symbolic token that can be "'passed around'

without regard to the specific characteristics of individuals or groups who handle them at any

particular juncture" (ibid., 22).   Giddens is a bit unclear as to what exactly he means by this but

we can turn to his predecessor, Karl Polanyi, for some answers.   Reviewing the (now classic)

historical and anthropological works on exchange, Polanyi argues that the truth about most

human societies throughout history is that "man's economy, as a rule, is submerged in his social

relationships" (Polanyi 1975, 48).   By this, Polanyi is referring to the types of social practices

described by Mauss, Malinowski, Thurnwald and others.   Malinowski's description of the Kula

circuit, for example, reveals that the naked trade of goods for gain was frowned upon and was

thus secondary to the ritual exchange of gifts, which themselves had to be exchanged according

to complicated social rules (Malinowski 1950, 83).   Similarly, in Mauss's description of the

potlatch, significant amounts of wealth were destroyed in the culmination of big celebrations in

which hierarchies were established, generosity was displayed and alliances made (Mauss 1990,

18).   In these practices, material objects were not seen as "products" or "goods" that have a

distinct existence from those who make or hold them; rather, they are material manifestations of

the relationships between people (Mauss 1990, 12, 66).   Likewise, what modern societies would

call labor, that is, human activity directed toward making goods or money, cannot be segregated

from the activities of helping, showing respect, fulfilling duties, etc. (Polanyi 1975, 277).   In

reviewing this literature, Polanyi concludes that modern society is an outlier among human

societies because "[i]nstead of the economy being embedded in social relations, social relations

are embedded in the economic system" (ibid., 60). This change is the essence of his "great transformation."

As opposed to this language of "disembedding," my group of late-twentieth century Marxist thinkers gives us the language of "abstracting" to describe this tremendous change in human societies. This language very literally appears at the front and center of Derek Sayer's book, *The Violence of Abstraction* and he pursues this theme in a later work on modernity and capitalism in which he raises the question:

> Might it not be the case that what is most socially consequential in capitalism is not the class relation on which it rests, but the wider abstraction of sociality and subjectivity entailed in the generalization of the commodity form which this relation makes possible – the revolution in the elementary forms of modern life which I have tried to trace here? (Sayer 1991, 90)"

Patrick Murray also deploys this language in his work on abstract labor (2000), as does Moishe Postone in his broader reinterpretation of Marx: "[i]n Marx's analysis, social domination in capitalism does not . . . consist in the domination of people by other people, but in the domination of people by abstract social structures" (Postone 1993, 30).

This abstraction school of Marxism (if I may call it that) garners its theoretical thrust from Marx's theory of value and its attendant theory of commodification. Marx's "capitalist mode of production" is defined by several concomitant features and relationships: that the vast majority of people are forced to sell their labor as a commodity (because they have been expropriated from the means of production); that virtually all products of labor are also bought and sold as commodities, meaning that they circulate in a sphere of universal equivalence (the market); that the most socially consequential aspect of labor and its products becomes their *value,* which is an abstraction from the concrete particulars of the commodities as well as the

labor that went into making them; that all of these relations, in turn, create a relationship in which labor is purchased by capital at a value that is systemically less than the value that the labor adds to the products that go on the market; that, because of this discrepancy, *surplus value* is systematically transferred to capital, thereby causing the capital to expand itself ceaselessly (this is why capital is sometimes referred to as self-expanding value[3]). Because of all these interdependent relationships, most people living under the capitalist mode of production lose control over one of the most significant parts of their lives: their surplus labor. Just as importantly, this domination occurs outside anyone's realm of experience because the day-to-day routine is to buy or sell labor at its market value in the same way that one would buy or sell any other commodity. For the abstraction school, escaping this peculiar form of oppression means overcoming "the structures of abstract compulsion characteristic of capitalism," and, to do that, society must overcome the capitalist value relationship itself (Postone 1993, 389).

In other modes of production in which the conditions described above do not exist, the structures of compulsion are not abstract. This lack of abstraction goes hand-in-hand with a more general regime of difference: "[t]he totality of heterogeneous use-values, or physical commodities reflects a totality of similarly heterogeneous forms of useful labor, which differ in order, genus and species and variety" (Marx 1976, 132). But when such use-values and their associated work enter capitalist relations, a regime of sameness takes over:

> Tailoring and weaving are the formative elements in the use values, coat and linen, precisely because these two kinds of labour are of different qualities; but only in so far as abstraction is made from their special qualities, only in so far as both possess the same quality of being human labour, do tailoring and weaving form the substance of the values of the two articles mentioned (Marx 1976, 136).

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[3] See, for example, page 107 of the Moore and Aveling translation of the first volume of *Capital,* available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf. Accessed 6/27/2024.

And through this process of abstraction, commodities become "merely congealed quantities of homogeneous labour – abstract labor" (ibid, 142).

Some readers would respond that the human experience is always abstract because unfiltered sensory perceptions are impossible for us; human perceptions are always mediated through representations, symbols and language and therefore our experiences are always abstract (or, at least, the socially important ones are); the social process of abstraction is therefore not unique to capitalism or modernity. This is a valid response that could have been made by Rousseau and a great many social theorists since him. It may also be a valid criticism of certain weaker moments of this abstraction school of Marxian thought.

In its strongest moments, however, this school of thought does not claim that capitalist/modern society abstracts human experience while other social systems do not. Rather, it elaborates Marx's argument of fetishization to claim that capitalist/modern society is different from other societies in that it *abstracts away the sociality* of human experience. That is to say, these theorists acknowledge that all human experience is socially mediated and therefore abstract in one way or another but they also argue that capitalist/modern society organizes certain key aspects of social life (such as wealth production and governance) in such a way that people do not experience them socially. To state this bluntly, these theorists are saying that capitalist/modern society is a sociality that is not experienced as a sociality.

A return to the topic of space can help shed some further light on what is meant by this. As Chakrabarty argued, Indians tend to experience space through an inside/outside lens, the crossover from one space to the other usually being marked by a boundary marker, wall or threshold (Chakrabarty 2002, 71). Under such a system of spatial practice, years of socialization

would make a person experience "inner space" more intensely than "outer space" and, hence, to treat it differently from the latter. The person who fails to do so would face opprobrium from others. Other spaces would be monumental for similar reasons while others would be polluted for one reason or another, perhaps by the kind of people who lived there (e.g., Dalits). This is the production of a "differential" (Lefebvre 1991, 50) space of which an individual's experience is inextricable from his or her experience of other people.

From the perspective adopted by this dissertation, the capitalist-modern framework produces a very different experience of space. Borrowing from Arendt, Anderson and Benjamin, I have already made the case that this framework disciplines our minds and our bodies to act as if we were having an out-of-body experience, standing on an Archimedean point and looking back down at ourselves and treating ourselves if we were located on a set of Cartesian coordinates (see: Gregory 1994). This space is fundamentally empty – and it is fundamentally homogeneous because of its emptiness. It is this character that makes it amenable to description in mathematical units of equivalence. The space can be *filled* with mountains, buildings and people but each of these items exist separately from the space itself, which has no ontological status. These items *happen* to be in their locations now but, against the backdrop of empty space, we could easily imagine a world in which they were replaced with other things – or with nothing at all. The things that fill this space are treated as contingencies that are functionally equivalent to one another. People are treated in much the same way. In the capitalist-modern experience of space, then, people and the relations between them are just incidental to a space that is separable from and precedential to them.

This is the sort of space that Lefebvre is referring to when he argues that "capitalism and neocapitalism have produced abstract space, which includes the 'world of commodities', its 'logic' and its worldwide strategies, as the power of money and that of the political state" (Lefebvre 1991, 53). More specifically he traces the production of abstract space to the separation of labor and material production from the other realms of life in the earliest phases of capitalism in Europe when: "productive activity (labour) became no longer one with the process of reproduction which perpetuated social life; but, in becoming independent of that process, labour fell prey to abstraction, whence abstract social labour — and *abstract space*" (Lefebvre 1991, 49). We can see that for Lefebvre the abstraction of space was part of a much broader process of social abstraction that was intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production.

In considering the abstraction of space, it is also useful to take a look at Marx's thoughts on property. In his discussion of rent in the third volume of *Capital,* Marx points out that under non-capitalist relations, land was not owned as private property in the bourgeois sense and so could not be treated as a commodity. He writes that the modern legal conception of private property "means nothing more than that the landowner can behave in relation to the land just as any commodity owner can with his commodities . . . " (Marx 1993, 753). That is to say, landowners in capitalism can dispose of their land in more or less any way they choose, something that is not possible in other modes of production. As capitalism develops, he goes on to say, any alternative form of ownership such as "feudal landed property, clan property or small peasant property with the mark community [4] is transformed into the economic form

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[4] The "mark system" was a medieval system of land tenure in which free men held land in common.

corresponding to [the capitalist] mode of production . . . " (ibid 754). This transformation is a process of simplifying the otherwise socially complex relations of land control:

> Landed property thus receives its purely economic form by the stripping away of all its former political embellishments and admixtures, in short all those traditional accoutrements that are denounced as uselessly and absurdly superfluous by the industrial capitalists themselves, and by their theoretical spokesmen, in their passionate struggle with landed property . . . (Marx 1993, 755)

Here we see a foreshadowing of Lefebvre's argument that capitalist relations tend to isolate certain aspects of life, like labor, from the otherwise wholistic flow of social life. With "political embellishments and admixtures" and "traditional accoutrements," Marx was referring to the all the sociocultural systems associated with land control/ownership. Medieval lords of European manors had many obligations beyond just collecting rent; they were expected to provide security, administer justice, send soldiers, organize holiday feasts and many other things. The experience of the serfs, meanwhile, was much more complicated than just paying rent to the lord; they had to submit to the manorial courts, serve in tithings, kneel in obeisance whenever the lord passed, etc.[5] The point here is that people quite directly experienced their "economic" relationships as social relationships:

> Whatever we may think then of the social roles in which men confront each other in such a society, the social relations between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own personal relations, and are not disguised as social relations between things, between products of labour (Marx 1976, 170).

Elsewhere Marx describes how European serfs would often work three days on their own land and three days on the lord's land (Marx 1976, 713) and how this arrangement gave them direct experience of the fact that one portion of their work was for their own well-being and another

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[5] I say more about these types of relationships in both Europe and South Asia in Chapter 3.

large portion was for the lord's benefit. Let us also remember that a medieval European villager had to patronize the lord's bakers and millers, had to seek the lord's permission to transfer property and get married, had to stay in the village unless given express permission to leave and had to accept many other restrictions on their ability to generate, keep and exchange material wealth (Chapter 3 discusses these types of practices in more detail, including their Indian counterparts).

What this meant was that the material aspect of one's life in such tributary (E. R. Wolf 1982, 76) systems was conducted through a multitude of face-to-face relationships in which shame, honor, piety and the like were inseparable from material gains and losses. If the bakers kept too much bread for themselves or if the lord was too demanding, then the serfs could attribute their losses directly to those individuals and, possibly, mobilize social pressure as a counter-measure within a "moral economy" (E. P. Thompson 1991). Conversely gains stemming from generous and magnanimous actions could be rewarded with social praise. Marx comments that "[t]hose ancient social organisms of production are much more simple and transparent than those of bourgeois society" (Marx 1976, 172). By this, Marx does not mean that people living under other modes of production were any more conscious of their socio-material relations; these, Marx argues, were disguised (or 'mystified') by religion (ibid, 165-167). What he means, rather, is that people's material relationships were inextricable from all their other social relationships and that all of these relationships were experienced as interactions between people. The sociality of their sustenance, was, in other words, experienced socially.

Under capitalist relations, by contrast, Marx's famous dictum of the fetish applies: ". . . the definite social relation between men themselves assumes . . . the fantastic form of a relation

between things" (Marx 1976, 165). Commodities circulate in the market according to the impersonal laws of supply and demand, price and profit. The price of my bread, be it high or low, cannot be attributed to anyone I know – even if I know my baker, I also expect him or her to follow the laws of the market. Likewise, I'm not compelled to patronize my baker, as my ancestors would have been, and so, if I don't like the bread or its price, I can go elsewhere. Meanwhile, my labor is also subject to the market's laws. Unlike the serfs of yore, I'm not compelled to work for the lord of the manor and the lord is not compelled to provide me with land. To get good results from my labor, my bosses don't not need to cajole, punish or shame me, they can just threaten to fire me. Likewise, I have no need to stay with my boss. I work for the best wages I can find and those wages determine how much bread I can obtain. According to the theory of the fetish, there is not a material relationship between me and the baker or even between me and the bread. There is, rather, a relationship between the thing I sell, my labor, and the thing I buy, the bread. The baker may be a relative or a close friend in whom I confide but, as far as the bread is concerned, as far as our material reproduction is concerned, our relationship goes no deeper than the momentary contact of exchange (in the digital age, even this momentary contact is disappearing).

To clarify a point, the lack of personal contact between producers and consumers is not the key problem behind commodity fetishism, though it is a problem in its own right. Sending a postcard to the Bangladeshi workers who make my clothes does not change the fact that such communication is totally unnecessary for me to obtain my clothes and, because such contact is purely optional, it has no bearing on the social phenomenon of the fetish, which is anyway baked into the cake of the capitalist relations. Marx makes the point that the capitalist mode of

production is the most social system yet to have arisen – in so far as it has made more people more materially interdependent that ever before. But the nature of capitalist relations is that they depersonalize material relations and so individuals do not experience this social system as a set of relations between living human beings. This is not to say that the depersonalization is an illusion. On the contrary, it is the distinctive reality of capitalist relations. Capitalism's trick is that it structures the relationships between living human beings in such a way that it is impossible to experience them as relationships between living human beings. This is the essence of the depersonalization. It is this self-effacing nature of capitalism/modernity that I am referring to with the phrase "social process of abstraction."

Michael Taussig compared the self-effacing nature of capitalist relations with effacing social relations more broadly (M. T. Taussig 1992). Specifically, he compared Marx's notion of commodity fetishism with Durkheim's theory of "collective representations," such as totems. Taussig pointed out that, in Durkheim's account of societies that arranged themselves around totemic figures, the societies were hiding from themselves their most important social relationships: those that constituted them as a group in the first place. What Taussig's comparison overlooks, however, is that the social relations that are effaced by the totem are still experienced as social relations, just as *different kinds* of social relations. The individuals within the tribe experience the totem – the rules surrounding it, its value, etc. – through their interactions with other people. So, if Durkheim is arguing that the totem is a transmutation of the social relations that reproduce the group itself, then he is also arguing that those social relations get transmuted as other social relations. I bring up Taussig's argument in order clarify a point: a

transparently social relation is not necessarily one that is fully understood by its participants; rather, it is one in which the participants experience their interactions with one another.

My focus so far has been on the realm of material reproduction because that was Marx's focus and it is he that discovered the social processes of abstraction that interest me. Although it may be true that Marx saw material production and reproduction as the central aspect of any society, he was very much aware that these processes only occur as part of the broader organization of society. As we have seen, Marx and his interpreters in the abstraction school believe that material reproduction is inextricable from all the other processes in society. What makes capitalism unique is that it makes people experience these processes as if they were separated from one another. But as mentioned, the perspective of this dissertation is that the "capitalist mode of production" is essentially another name for what we otherwise call "modern society." With that in mind, the focus could just as easily be shifted to the Weberian concerns of bureaucracy, proceduralization and rational-legal authority. In many ways these are more important to the study of sanitation.

A key point here is that capitalism is (and has to be) a rule-governed system. Capitalist accumulation depends on the establishment of equivalences amongst commodities, labor being the most important of those commodities. In order to establish equivalence ratios, people have to be formally free to exchange their commodities. In order to do that they have to respect the rules related to private property, free exchange and contract. To maintain the free element of the exchange, the rules must be enforced fairly. Fair enforcement is a process that requires not only police officers but also an entire apparatus of monitoring and adjudicating that itself has to be

governed by rules. Rationalized bureaucracy is thus a necessary part of the capitalist mode of production.

More to the point, the production of fairness by the bureaucratic apparatus forces it to create equivalences between different situations (for example: establishing that two particular sets of behavior both equally count as extortion and warrant equal punishment). So, the equivalences found on the market are parallel to and inextricable from the equivalences generated by the rules of bureaucratic organizations, whether those belong to the government or to for-profit companies. From the preceding, it should be clear why the abstraction school sees modernity and capitalism as two sides of the same proverbial coin. Both are seen as instances of a dominant force that David Held called "rule of equivalence" (Held 1980, 66).

In order for this rule-based, rationalized system to exist, it is vital that it be based impersonal loyalty. This fact takes us to Weber's theory that "it is decisive for the specific nature of modern loyalty to an office that…it does not establish loyalty to a person, like the vassal's or disciple's faith in feudal or in patrimonial relations of authority. Modern loyalty is devoted to impersonal and functional purposes" (Weber 1970). But, as Derek Sayer argued through the work of Weber, this impersonal equivalence-making apparatus depended on workers who were themselves disciplined through the impersonal forces of market processes:

> The essence of all such bureaucratic discipline is 'the consistently rationalized, methodically trained and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is unconditionally suspended and the actor is unswervingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command.' Specifically, Weber emphasizes, 'the discipline of officialdom refers to the attitude-set of the official for precise obedience within his habitual activity, in public as well as private organizations', and 'this discipline increasingly becomes the basis of all order, however great the practical importance of administration on the basis of the filed documents may be'. It is 'the settled orientation of man'—that is, of modern 'man'—'for keeping to the

habitual rules and regulations' that is the foundation of this new order. Bureaucracy rests on the reorganization of habitus. Weber argues that such 'mechanization' is facilitated by a guaranteed salary and the opportunity of 'a career that is not dependent upon mere accident and arbitrariness'; working in the same direction are 'status sentiment among officials', and 'the purely impersonal character of office work.' The individual bureaucrat, unable to 'squirm out of the apparatus in which he is harnessed', is thus 'forged to the community of all the functionaries who are integrated into the mechanism' (Sayer 1991, 136)

While the bureaucrats' salary may elevate them above hourly wage workers, the threat of losing their salary and entering into the precarious world of hourly workers is enough to make them function as well oiled cogs in the equivalence machine. They are susceptible to the disciplinary threat of being fired precisely because they are neither members of aristocratic families nor members of common families serving on an aristocrat's behalf. According to the ideals of liberal society, bureaucrats in both for-profit and government-run bureaucracies should be highly susceptible to market discipline. We know that government bureaucrats are less so in practice and that this job security, which is often traded for a relatively low salary, insulates them from the vagaries of the marketplace. The default condition of bureaucrats is thus the same as that of any other worker: they are free from the means of production and thus compelled to sell their labor on a market.

Drawing from both Marx and Arendt, I refer to this condition as "expropriated freedom" and I take it to be the prevailing economic condition across the globe, especially among its urban populations. People who have been expropriated from the means of production as Marx says, are free in a double sense: *free to* sell their labor as they like but also *free of* the land and resources that would allow them to produce for themselves (Arendt 1998, 67; Marx 1976, 272). The consequence of such freedom is not just potential poverty; high wages and strong welfare provisions can alleviate the poverty, but they cannot change the fundamental condition of

expropriated freedom (Arendt 1998; 117; Marx 1976, 769). The consequence of such freedom is that one loses ownership of one's "share of a common world" (Arendt 1998, 253), a share that is a social position and a social position that is an anchor for one's participation in a community of phenomenological world-makers (Arendt 1998, 94-96). Under conditions of expropriated freedom, most people are reduced to mere "job holders" who are free from such communities (ibid., 319) – free, again, in a double sense. As we shall see in Chapter 2, keeping ownership of a share in a community is a method used by sanitation workers to protect themselves from expropriated freedom.

So, the conditions that lead government employees – bureaucrats or otherwise – to perform their functions are not significantly different from those that lead factory workers to perform theirs. Seen in this light, equivalence in exchange and equivalence in rule-making are two sides of the same of coin. That coin could be thought of as capitalist society but it could just easily be thought of as modern society. In this dissertation, I will generally use the adjective "capitalist" and the noun "capitalism" when topics like commodification and proletarianization are of central concern and words like "modern" and "modernity" when topics like rule-following, public space and bureaucracy are of primary importance.

The social processes of abstraction that define modernity and capitalism are by their very nature driven to totalization, but they do not necessarily succeed in their totalizing ambitions. Indeed, it could be said that they always exist in some modality of failure. A great amount of feminist scholarship, cultural anthropology (Ong 2010; M. Taussig 2010) and subaltern historiography has shown us that people regularly resist these social processes of abstraction, whether consciously or unconsciously. On the basis of my fieldwork, I argue that one form of

resistance, one such modality of failure, stems from the possession and usage of what I call

"transparently social wealth." By that phrase, I refer to types of wealth whose sociality *is*

experienced by those who possess it. As in the example of medieval European villages above,

one's material wealth, whether it be the food one eats or the land one occupies *feels* like it is

embedded in social relationships – one is aware that one's capacity to possess what one currently

has as well one's ability to possess and consume wealth in the future depends upon one's good

relationships with others. Transparently social wealth stands opposed to capitalist commodity

wealth, which, as described above, is opaque to its owners in so far as they do not experience its

sociality. As Marx remarked in the first sentence of the first volume of *Capital,* commodity

wealth is the predominant form of wealth in capitalism: "The wealth of societies in which the

capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities" (Marx

1976, 125). But even where capitalism prevails, all other forms of wealth and livelihood are not

stamped out entirely. Transparently social wealth can thus exist in the interstices and margins of

capitalist society.

In places like India, where capitalism/modernity does not prevail as thoroughly as it does

in the countries of the global north, transparently social wealth can emerge as a significant force,

even though its forms may differ considerably from its traditional counterparts. I have already

alluded to the fact that I discovered a set of practices among Delhi's sanitation workers in which

they own their livelihoods rather sell their labor, and I have also alluded to the fact that these

practices constitute resistances to or, perhaps more precisely, negations of capitalism and

modernity. In this dissertation, I will examine these practices in greater detail, I will provide

historical and comparative context for them, and I will show the ways in which they constitute

transparently social wealth. I will also examine the machinations of a Balmiki organized crime leader with strong ties to the major sanitation union and argue that his wealth too constitutes transparently social wealth. All of this will figure into my argument that the conduct of sanitation work in Delhi cannot be understood without also understanding the transparently social wealth of those who do the work.

The reason that I choose to frame this project in terms of wealth rather than labor is precisely because I'm talking about pockets of non-capitalist social relations that exist within a predominantly capitalist world. My point is that, under such conditions, labor does not exist as a distinct activity but is rather interwoven with all the other social relationships of peoples' lives. The broader concept of wealth thus makes more sense, especially when it is specified to be transparently social wealth.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter 1, I will briefly lay out the relevant history of the formation of the Balmiki community in northern India. I will also go over the pertinent aspects of Delhi's history, it's governmental structure, and its sanitation system. In Chapter 2, I will show how two classes of sanitation workers use a specific form of transparently social wealth to insulate themselves from the condition of expropriated freedom. This specific form of wealth is what I call "proprietary livelihood," a practice and an institution in which people own their jobs instead of selling their labor to an employer. Under these arrangements, a family holds exclusive rights to a client list and these rights are protected by the caste community. Unlike a capitalistic small business, they are protected from the vagaries of the market by their community. But also unlike a small

business, they have more complex obligations to their community than would a small business proprietor. I will argue that proprietary livelihood is a manner of organizing labor and service provision in such a way that a family owns a position in a community in a transparently social manner. In Chapter 3, I will show that proprietary livelihood and similar arrangements have a long history in both India and Europe, and I will also show that they have the effect of binding their owner to a phenomenological community.

In Chapter 4, I describe the cultural presence of an organized crime leader of the Balmiki community. Reviving Marshall Sahlins' argument about big men, I argue that he and the community of people who surrounded him shared another form of transparently social wealth. I show that the crime boss held legal title to very few possessions of his own but was able to appear wealthy and to mobilize a lot of resources because of his function as a big man at the center of a social network. His network penetrated into government as well, a fact that ultimately caused his undoing as his own political ambitions disturbed the hierarchy at the heart of his transparently social wealth.

In Chapter 5, I detail the ways in which upper middle class neighborhood organizations were unknowingly trying to stamp out the transparently social wealth of the sanitation workers. Dissatisfied with the sanitary and general cleanliness conditions of their neighborhoods, the members of these organizations did not understand that they had no power over either the formal or the informal sanitation workers of their neighborhood. Even less did they understand that there was no authority or power who had much power over their behavior because they weren't selling their labor to anyone; they were holders of proprietary livelihoods. These organizations and some associated NGOs tried to make the sanitation workers their employees in the hopes

that the power to hire and fire the workers directly would allow them to achieve the "neat and clean" neighborhoods they aspired to live in. They encountered much resistance in the process, some of it violent. I argue that this conflict between the upper middle class organizations and the sanitation workers should be seen as a conflict between the modern/capitalist processes of social abstraction and the resistance to them generated by transparently social wealth.

The sixth and final chapter of the dissertation attempts to preemptively argue against would-be critics. The types of practices that I'm describing as transparently social wealth would be seen by economists and many political scientists as rent-extracting and rent-seeking behavior. Bribery, extortion, the use of government power, unionized action and cartelization are all classic examples of rent-oriented activities. In this chapter, I closely analyze the concept of rent in both its classical and neo-classical forms and argue that it almost always designates either instances of transparently social wealth or, otherwise, instances in which sociality has penetrated capitalism's social processes of abstraction.

In this dissertation I hope to achieve a few main goals. The first is simply to bring to light the fact that non-capitalist cultural practices of work and ownership can and do exist in metropolitan areas like Delhi. Through my fieldwork and supporting historical research, I attempt to highlight the details and social dynamics of these practices. The second goal is to renew attention to the fact that, despite their disciplinary quality, the production of public goods such as sanitation and environmental cleanliness is a process that involves labor just as much as the production of private goods. Finally, I hope to bring attention to forms of wealth as an object of study within the broad project of subaltern studies and to show that a good deal of the resistance to capitalism and modernity is happening through transparently social wealth.

Chapter 1
Delhi, Caste and the Work of Waste

Introduction

In this chapter, I will lay out some of the context needed for the argument of the rest of the

dissertation. The main fields of that context are the history of Delhi, the basic dynamics of caste

as they apply to my fieldsite and my argument, and, finally, the workings of Delhi's sanitation

system. Because my argument is very specifically focussed on the practices of transparently

social wealth in the Balmiki community, none of these topics will be treated at great length.

Slightly more attention will be paid to caste and the formation of the Balmiki community in

Delhi because these issues are at the center of this project. Nothing in this chapter should be

controversial except for my reading of the old caste system (which is as a guarantor of owned

livelihoods and thus as a practice of transparently social wealth *par excellence*). This chapter

provides only the first pass at that argument as a primer for what is to come in the next two

chapters.

Delhi of Old, Delhi of New

At the time of my fieldwork (2004-5), the name Delhi generally referred to the National Capital

Territory of Delhi, a special governing unit in India that had less autonomy than a full-fledged

State (e.g., Punjab) but somewhat more than India's other major political subunit, a Union

Territory (e.g., Ladakh). Within the NCT of Delhi lay the actual capital city of India, New Delhi.

That planned city, which was designed and built by the British in the 1920s, was more directly

controlled by the central government than the rest of Delhi and its day-to-day administration was

done by the New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC). When I use the name "Delhi" in this

dissertation, I will generally not be referring to New Delhi but to the primarily urban area that

was administered by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD). The MCD governed the vast

majority of the NCT's land along with the 14 million inhabitants who then lived in it. Since the

time of my fieldwork, the population of Delhi has grown considerably but the administrative

structure is largely the same (although massive changes were introduced but then later reversed).

Many speculate that Delhi was the site of Indraprastha, one of the important capitals

mentioned in the *Mahabharata.* Evidence for this claim is spotty at best and the earliest physical

evidence of substantial buildings is from the fourthfourth century CE (Spear 2002, 5). Since that

time, various Hindu and Muslim dynasties founded their capitals in the Delhi area, which was

also the seat of the Mughals at the time of their final demise in the mid-nineteenth century.

Beginning in 1911, the British began shifting their capital from Calcutta to what is now New

Delhi. While Delhi is dotted with ruins and has some Mughal-era neighborhoods, the vast

majority of its housing stock and infrastructure have been built since independence. Among the

newer portions of Delhi are what are known as "resettlement colonies" – large tracts of land

that were allotted to the victims of slum clearance projects. The majority of the people described

in this dissertation lived and worked in these newer parts of the city, although the main character

of Chapter 4 resided in Old Delhi.

The latter area of the city, originally known as Shahjahanabad, had the first systematic canal and drainage system in the history of the city (N. Gupta 1981, 50; Naqvi, 1986, 58). The British began implementing larger and more modern drainage and wastewater systems in the late nineteenth century and they greatly accelerated this effort as they prepared to make Delhi their capital city in the early twentieth century (N. Gupta 1981, 167).

For the purposes of this dissertation, the most relevant aspects of Delhi's history and administration are those that pertain to waste and sanitation. In most of those aspects, Delhi was not much different than other major cities. In most cities around the world, the vast majority of solid waste was either biodegradable or relatively harmless (e.g., glass and iron). It was with the invention of plastics, styrofoam, and other artificial packaging materials in the mid-twentieth century that cities began to produce less reusable, more durable and more harmful solid waste (Gill 2010, 2). The production of this harmful waste increased with rising standards of living, which is why Delhi and similar cities in the Global South create far more solid waste than they used to but far less per person than the average city of the Global North. The waste disposal system in Delhi is complicated and will be discussed in detail throughout the rest of this dissertation, but allow me to briefly note that it was reasonably modern in the central and authorized parts of the city, which were served by sewers, a solid waste hauling system and landfills outside the city. The unauthorized and peripheral areas rarely had such facilities. Like all less prosperous cities, Delhi struggles to maintain both the appearance of cleanliness and a genuinely good sanitary environment for its citizens.[1]

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[1] Complaints about the messiness of Delhi are a mainstay of public discourse. For one example: https://www.asianage.com/metros/delhi/150117/why-is-the-capital-city-so-dirty.html#google_vignette. Accessed 6/5/24.

Where Delhi and other South Asian cities differs a bit from other cities is in the history of their treatment of human excrement, a history that continues to have great impact today. Like other cities around the world, Delhi's major waste removal problem prior to the creation of modern sewers and flush toilets was the removal human feces, euphemistically known as nightsoil. Around the world, urban nightsoil was valued by rural hinterlands as fertilizer (D. Ferguson 2014). In all of this, Delhi was no different from other cities. What made (and continues to make) nightsoil removal different in South Asian cities like Delhi was the institution of caste. While other parts of the world may have seen nightsoil removal as a generally disgusting and low status job, India saw it as a personally *polluting* task that condemned its practitioners to the bottom of a brutal social hierarchy.

Castes of Old

Many people, even native-born Indians and scholars of South Asia, have a very limited or distorted view of the institution of caste. If Westerners learn anything about caste at all, it is usually that India has a five-tiered, hierarchical system consisting of four castes (priests/*brahman,* warriors/*kshatriya,* traders/*vaishya,* farmer-workers/*shudra)* and outcasts who were considered "untouchable." This ordering of society is what is presented in the second century CE text known as the Laws of Manu (the *manusmriti)* which prescribes to each caste or *varna* its duty or *dharm* (Manu 1991; Srinivas 2002, 182). This text and this conception of caste has been seen as very significant by academics, colonial administrators and politicians (Dirks 2001). It is what prompts many twenty-first century Dalit activists to dub anyone with a hierarchical attitude as *manuwadi* (a "Manu-ist"). The text and its description of caste has had a

secondary cultural influence in so far as Hindu scholars and Hindu organizations have promoted sanitized versions of its prescriptions as true Indian tradition.

The precise evolution of the institution of caste over the millennia is beyond the scope of this project and is anyway not well known. We can say for certain that it is as ever changing and evolving as any other human institution. We can also say with a high degree of confidence that for the last three or four centuries people have not experienced their hierarchical structures in the way that *manusmriti* prescribed. Rather than living in four or five tiers, Indians tended to live in tribe-like groupings that were formed out of strict rules of endogamy, commensality, water access and space usage. Any village or town in India would have had dozens of these groupings and they would have been arranged in a hierarchical order, one that was often contentious. "Caste" is the English word that generally was and still is used to describe such groupings, although usage of the word can be fluid. During my fieldwork, the English word "community" was also used to describe such groups (and it was used to describe religious groups as well). The Hindustani words *jati*, *quom* and *samaj* were also commonly used to describe these groupings and are also regularly used in the historical record. It should be noted that, in addition to being hierarchically arranged, these tribe-like formations had regional domains.

I describe these groups as "tribe-like" because they were, and generally still are, endogamous and reasonably cohesive groups. They are, however, very different from what are conventionally known as tribes because they have no hope or ambition of material or political autonomy (Wolf 1982, 95). In previous centuries, these groups tended to colonize and monopolize some socially necessary task and to demand material compensation for its performance (Mandelbaum 1970, 15; Marriott 1965, 2; Srinivas 2002, 42; Wiser 1932, 32).

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These tasks consisted of any activity that (a) people sought to make discrete from its activities in general and (b) that people might want to have performed by others because of practical or status-related considerations. These tasks also consisted of activities that could, for some combination of practical and cultural reasons, form the basis of a livelihood for their practitioners. A few examples of such tasks were the conducting of rituals, the carrying of water, and the making of leather goods. The point is that each such task was colonized or monopolized by an endogamous group that demanded a livelihood out of its performance. Because most of the other tasks in any given village or town were controlled by other endogamous groups through jealously guarded monopoly rights, people were overwhelmingly confined to performing the task of their forebears. Because of this enduring *bond* to a task, the members of these groups tended to be identified with the task that they performed: a gardener (*mali)* was not just a person who happened to perform gardening work but also a person who belonged to an endogamous group of gardeners. In his classic (but problematic) work on a North Indian village, William Wiser names 24 endogamous groups that are bonded to a task, including priests (*brahman*), goldsmiths (*sunar)*, accountants (*kyasth)*, carpenters (*barhai/nai)* and cotton carders (*dhuna)*. In other regions, there were other endogamous groups with other names who specialized in these tasks. It is to groups like these that the word "caste" properly refers. That is to say, a caste is a regional, endogamous group that is associated with some form of work.[2]

Foreigners and a good many Indians frequently take their understanding of caste from the Laws of Manu but there is little reason to believe that its prescriptions ever became a widespread social reality. From the time we begin to have reliable records in the seventeenth century until

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[2] The 1931 census listed 4,147 castes in the whole of India while the government's 1990 People's of India project, led by K.S. Singh, found 4,635 castes (See Singh (1992).

well into the twentieth century, caste was mainly a question of who you could marry, whom you could eat with, who would support you and how you earned your livelihood. While there would have been pragmatic modifications made to all the hierarchy-establishing rules, a very strict division was made between the tribe-like groupings that were deemed "twice-born" and those that were deemed "once-born." The latter, a minority in most villages, were the people who were known as untouchables and are now known as Dalits. Among the many oppressive features of their existence was the fact they were barred from directly drinking from village wells and were forced to beg for water from the higher castes. This meant that the same places that allowed them to garner sustenance also placed their biological lives under a perpetual threat. We will discuss below how caste has become less brutally hierarchical, and less directly economic but has still retained its endogamous character quite strongly. Strongly enough that it has become more akin to an ethnicity.

The bond between an endogamous group and its source of livelihood was enduring and durable but it was not unbreakable. It is well documented that members of a caste might perform tasks outside of their primary domain if there was no one else was there to perform them (Lewis 1958, 58). Dead animals were generally disposed of by the untouchable *chamars* in northern India, but, if a village lacked a *chamar* family, another family from a Dalit caste, such as a *bhangi* family, might collect the dead animals. Likewise *chamars* might perform the traditional cleaning tasks associated with *bhangis* should there be no *bhangi* families in a given village. Dalits might not always have been able to make such decisions by choice as the dominant castes frequently forced the other caste to do the work so as to protect the twice-born castes from pollution (Nehru 1932, 27). Many of the lower castes also performed other types of odd jobs for

the landowning castes on an in-kind or in-cash basis (ibid, 70). Most common among these odd jobs was agricultural labor performed at harvest time. In doing these other tasks, they were supplementing their primary source of livelihood but they retained that primary source of livelihood as a stable home base of material sustenance.

It is also well documented that castes could move up social hierarchies through processes called sanskritization or ashrafization (Srinivas 2002, 200–220). As they moved up the hierarchy, they would begin to perform more esteemed tasks (ibid). Purity and pollution beliefs would of course limit peoples' ability to move both up and down the ladder but some movement was possible. The important point to remember is that all the potential livelihoods were monopolized by some other group and so a move up or down would have very likely been an encroachment on someone else's source of sustenance. All of this is to say that the bond between the endogamous group and its livelihood may have been somewhat elastic, but the fact that other groups fiercely defended ownership of their existing livelihoods made this bond very difficult to break.

My words in the last few paragraphs have been very carefully chosen to be consistent with both the theoretical perspective laid out in the introduction as well as with arguments that will be made in Chapter 2 and Chapter Chapter 3. I specifically avoided using words like "occupation," "profession" and "job" because they connote the modern/capitalist relationship of "employment." Even more deliberately, I avoided the use of the word "labor" because it connotes human economic activity in a purely general and abstract form, one that is only conceivable under capitalist relations. Such a concept of labor makes no sense in traditional caste society (or any non-capitalist society) because the remunerative activities that we would

otherwise call "labor" are completely suffused into all the other processes of social life. I chose

to describe the activities of the castes as processes of ""colonizing"" or ""monopolizing""

certain tasks because I believe that the social terrain of tributary-agrarian societies was composed

of "parcels" of tasks in a manner quite similar to the way that their physical terrain consisted of

parcels of land. As agricultural land is associated with a source of sustenance or livelihood, so

too are each of those socially required tasks. In chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation, I will argue

that this manner of social organization should be called "proprietary livelihood" and I will show

how versions of proprietary livelihood still existed among Balmiki sanitation workers in early

twenty-first century Delhi.

I chose to describe the relationship between a caste and its livelihood in terms of "bond"

precisely because this word has simultaneously negative and positive connotations: one can be

bonded in love, as a parent is to a child, or one can be bonded in servitude, as a serf is to a lord.

Castes were bonded to a particular task for many generations (Mandelbaum 1970, 13; Srinivas

2002, 41; Wiser 1932, xix) and, if this task was of low status, they were condemned to miserable

lives from birth. They were moreover prevented from leaving their village position in much the

same way that medieval villeins were prevented from leaving their land. The dominant,

landowning caste would punish them if the obligations associated with their position were not

performed (Lewis 1958, 58). But even the people in the lowest castes were bonded to their

traditional tasks in such a way that they effectively owned a livelihood. This arrangement meant

that they had stable access to material sustenance even if they couldn't directly access land or

other physical means of production. As Marx argued that laborers in capitalism were doubly free

(Marx 1976, 272) – free to work when and where they chose but also *free of* the means of

production – I am conversely arguing that castes of previous centuries were doubly bonded to their livelihoods.

Finally, I chose to mention the Sanskritic concept of *varna* as a sort of afterthought in order to counter the common ways of presenting caste. These common ways common ways tend give the impression that the existing caste system is a corruption or complexification of that presented in the *manusmriti* (William Wiser is especially guilty of this). While it is true that one could think of the various castes as existing on the tiers prescribed by that ancient text, it is also true that one could completely ignore the text and experience no difference in how one's life is lived (see: Srinivas 2002, 282). However, no Indian could ignore the rules pertaining to marriage, sharing food, using wells and avoiding contact without facing severe repercussions. To the extent that notions of purity and pollution are derived from ancient texts, it is the conception and enforcement of the purity/pollution rules that matters in a given place and time. While these rules may sometimes resemble the ancient prescriptions, it is well documented that the rules change over time (Lewis 1958, 68–70). Instead of placing the emphasis on ancient prescriptions, my representation of caste very deliberately centers itself on endogamy and the organization of livelihoods.

The double bond between endogamous groups and their old tasks has not been entirely lost. By way of example, in 2004, some Balmiki friends were guiding me through the gullies of an informal settlement in Delhi when we came to an open space that smelled of smoke and was full of pottery wheels and clay pots – the latter ranging in size from tandoori ovens all the way down to disposable tea cups. My friends told me that we were in a neighborhood of *kumhars* (potters). I double checked to make sure that they were referring to members of the *jati* (caste)

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rather than people who just happened to make ceramics and they responded with emphatic

insistence that only members of the *kumhar* caste did that sort of work. From their perspective,

at least, the connections between the *kumhars* and their traditional livelihood was still very

strong. Regardless of how generalizable their perception was, it is clear that people still tend to

associate castes with the tasks to which they were historically bonded.

While the old double bond survives in pockets, capitalist conditions have loosened it if

not completely destroyed it in most places in most places. Not many castes have the firm

monopolistic hold over a given industry that they once did and their members are now much

more likely to find *employment for wages* in other fields of work. All of that said, people in

India still socially locate one another on the basis of caste, and they still associate the caste with

its traditional occupation. And indeed, the bond between endogamous groups and their old tasks

still weakly endures but for far more mundane reasons than livelihood ownership: enskilling by

the family, business connections, reputation of skill and, of course, outright venality. People who

belong to the trading community of Banias are still very readily found in the business sector;

Chamars still do a lot of work with leather; and the vast majority of priests are still Brahmans

even if a lot of Brahmans have moved into other fields. It has been observed that castes today

have essentially become endogamous ethnic groups with their own patron deities or saints, their

own booster organizations and the like (Bayly 1999, 307; Jaffrelot 2000a; Natrajan 2012;

Omvedt 2001). In contrast to ethnic groups in most Western Countries, which tend to be based

on race, religion, language, etc., castes are still identified with their historical sources of

livelihood (at least in my personal experience). In light what I have just argued, I wish to

slightly modify what I said above: the best way to think about modern castes are as regional,

endogamous ethnic groups that are loosely associated with some sort of occupation or profession.

As mentioned, contact with human excrement was not just considered disgusting in India, it was considered extremely polluting to the individual who performed that task. That individual was, in turn, considered polluting to all of those who did not do that sort of work. How, then, do you get people to clean the dry latrines, cesspools and streets if any person who starts doing that sort of work would become both polluted and polluting (and face harsh, life-threatening treatment as a result). You couldn't enslave such polluted people because the enslavers themselves would inevitably become polluted. Tributary-agrarian relations contain the solution within them: you turn that polluting work into an ownable source of livelihood to which some people had a proprietary right. The people with no other option will perform those polluting tasks because doing so provides them with intergenerational sustenance and makes them a part of society, even if it is a highly marginalized part. Proprietary livelihood thus supports an extremely hierarchical and exploitative system by pulling people from the brink of expropriated freedom and the bare-life existence that comes with it. These ideas will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2 and Chapter Chapter 3.

The Making of Balmikis in Delhi

In framing caste in this way, I join with the most prominent historian of Delhi's Balmiki community, Vijay Prashad, in arguing that the structural-functionalist accounts of caste that were popular in the mid-twentieth century must be avoided (Prashad 2000, xvi). The accounts of Wiser (1932), Srinivas (2002), Dube (1955), Dumont (1970), Beteille (1965), Mandelbaum

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(1970) and their contemporaries provided us with tremendous ethnographic data on the workings of caste in the twentieth and earlier centuries and they provided us with some valuable theoretical insights as well. Unfortunately, their structural-functionalist perspective locked them into seeing Indian villages and indeed Indian society as a whole (this was this was especially true of true of Dumont) as discrete, coherent social systems in which caste *functioned* to strengthen social solidarity. Caste, purity, pollution and hierarchy were all made to fit together like the organs of social organism, the anatomy of which only social scientists could decipher. Changes due to simple things like time and regional interaction required special explanations through concepts like "culture contact" and "continuity and change." Although I deeply disagree with their larger theoretical framing, I believe that most of their observations about the everyday practices of caste to be accurate and useful.

Vijay Prashad was correct in his assessment about the structural-functionalist literature on caste but he overreacted to it to it with an argument that portrays the link between an occupation and the Dalit castes as a fantasy dreamt up by the British and the Brahmans and then reified into reality (Prashad 2000, xv–xviii). Discussing Delhi's late nineteenth century expansion, he writes that "[t]he British hired a set of castes into [Delhi's] sanitation department based on the dominant belief that caste, especially for Dalits, had something to do with occupation" (ibid, xv). He goes on to argue that the Mehtars, who were otherwise thought to constitute a major sanitation-oriented caste in the U.P.-Harayana area, were not in fact a caste at all: "The Mehtars were certainly not a community which had endogamous and exogamous strictures . . ." (ibid, 21). Yet the Raj-era ethnographer Richard Greenven, whom he cites elsewhere, clearly stated the opposite (ibid, 8). Regarding another north Indian sanitation caste, the Chuhras, Prashad argues that they

had no particular connection to they had not particular connection to sanitation work, but that sanitation-related tasks were just one of many menial jobs that this group performed around the village (ibid, 26). He goes on to generalize to all untouchable castes: ". . the Dalits entered the workforce as generic laborers (ibid, 27)." From all of this he constructs a narrative in which (a) castes are not connected to occupations (at least not Dalits) and (b) in which the British-led modernization of Delhi effectively transformed generic sweepers into a *caste of sweepers*: "The British built upon these reductionist images to hire only the Balmikis into the sanitation departments and to leave them with few other options for their livelihood" (ibid, xv).

He goes on to argue that the vast majority of Delhi's sweepers (or *safai karamcharis)* became an endogamous caste group known as the Balmiki Samaj. Prashad reminds us that Dalits did not necessarily identify themselves as Hindu and harbored deep resentment of the upper castes even when they did (Prashad 2000, 74). As the Dalit consciousness was on the rise in the early twentieth century, there was also a drive to by Gandhians and Hindu Nationalists to bring the Dalits into "the Hindu fold." In northern India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Arya Samaj was the leader of this effort. The group sought to rid Hinduism of its internal divisions, to foster an unmediated relationship between the individual and the divine (like the Protestants of early-modern Europe) and to form the whole of India into an autonomous, exclusively *Hindu* nation (Flood 1996). Prashad shows us that, beginning in the 1920s, the Arya Samaj successfully got many of the sweeper castes of northern India to identify as Hindu by getting them to adopt as their patron saint the purported author of the Ramayana, Maharishi Valmiki. From this act of re-identification, these castes began to amalgamate

themselves into a single, much larger endogamous group with the name Valmiki or Balmiki (Prashad 2000, 91).

So, when reduced its pith, Prashad's narrative of Delhi's Balmiki community seems to be that rural, free-wage laborers of the nineteenth century joined together into an occupation-bound caste in a twentieth century city. Such a narrative almost completely reverses the modernization narratives of the twentieth century structural-functionalists described above. In their narrative, Indians tended to move from the occupation-bound castes of the villages to wage laborers of the city without entirely giving up their caste identity.[3] In constructing his narrative, I believe that Prashad was following in the footsteps of Bernard Cohn and Nicholas Dirks in trying to show us that caste was not a timeless Indian institution but was in fact a product of the reifying effects of colonial paradigms and policy (Cohn 1996, 8; Dirks 2001, 5).

There should be no doubt that many knowledge producers of both the colonial and the structural-functionalist variety portrayed caste as a timeless and *essential* component of an Indian "social organism" and there should also be no doubt that this narrative should be resisted. I am, however, highly skeptical of Prashad's blame-it-on-the-British counter narrative. The major supporting evidence of his argument is that Dalits tended to perform significant amounts of agricultural labor and otherwise perform menial tasks around the village and were not therefore people bound to a particular task but, rather, laborers in general (Prashad 2000, 27). However, as Prashad himself mentions, some of this work was mandatory unpaid labor known as *begar*. Also, there is very good reason to think that their performance of these tasks was done according to intergenerational agreements with the upper castes and was not done on an optional fee-for-

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[3] See the works mentioned above.

service basis (Wiser 1932, 25–28). It is undeniable that Dalits tended to perform a lot of different types of labor in their villages but this does not mean that they were footloose laborers. I submit that a better interpretation is that each of them occupied a social position in their respective villages and that this position came with various customary benefits and obligations. The central benefit would have been a proprietary livelihood that consisted of a set of clients who would make in-kind payments over the course of a year (and not on a fee-for-service basis). This heritable proprietary livelihood was recognized by the village, protected by one's caste-mates and treated as the anchor of a family's position in the village. For Dalits, the possibility of getting compensated for other tasks that were required by the upper castes was another benefit of one's position in the village (necessary because the basic income would have been hardly sufficient). Other benefits might have included a portion of the collective harvest, a garden-sized plot of land, various other payments (often in the form of a ceremonial gifts) and various concessions such as grazing rights (Wiser 1932, 32–64). For the upper castes, the obligations could be quite complicated but for the lower castes the obligations would have primarily consisted of all the work, including the dreaded *begar*. The variety of menial tasks performed by Dalits was not, as Prashad would have it, an indication that they were free wage laborers, but rather part of the package of obligations and benefits that came with owning a position in the village – a position to which they were doubly bonded.

I believe that that the sanitation-oriented castes primarily came to an expanding Delhi from villages in which they experienced this relationship of double bondage. Evidence for this comes from the fact that the sweepers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had implemented systems of proprietary livelihood that were similar to what they had in the villages.

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Each family of urban sweepers and scavengers had systems of customary rights in which they owned client lists as transferrable pieces of property. The families would band together as a group when these rights were threatened (Barve 1952, 32; Shinoda 2005, 52–55; Srivastava 1997, 26). Prashad's own work shows documentation of this (Prashad 2000, 4–5). During my fieldwork, I found that the door-to-door garbage collectors still had a system of proprietary livelihood, even in some of Delhi's newest and most upscale neighborhoods.

Another aspect of my fieldwork also reinforced my skepticism of Prashad's narrative. I conducted much of it in a colony of government-built apartments that had been allotted to MCD *safai karamcharis* and were still overwhelmingly occupied by them and their ever-expanding families. Known as Sangam Park, the colony of 4-story buildings had been built primarily between 1969 and 1971. The older generation of sweepers, who had come to Delhi in the 50s and 60s and later received units in Sangam Park, told stories of how their families used to clean the lanes and do manual scavenging in the villages from whence they came. They also talked about how they used to be known by other names in the villages – *mehtar, chuhra, bhangi* etc. – and that they only started calling themselves Balmikis after they arrived in Delhi. Most also mentioned that their parents had connections with people who already worked in the MCD and that they had to bribe their way into the job.[4] So, if, in the post-independence decades, they were coming to the city not as at-large wage laborers but as village sweepers using connections to get jobs as municipal sweepers, then it is hard for me to believe that this was not what was happening in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The structural-functionalist

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[4] This point will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.

narrative, to reiterate, should be resisted but so too should Prashad's attempt to blame it all on the British. attempt to blame it all on the British.

Another narrative is possible if we focus on the proprietary livelihood aspect of caste. As I will show in Chapters 2 and 3, there is very good reason to think that the structural-functionalist accounts of the everyday practices of caste were quite accurate. If, however, one shifts the focus away from the ways in which hierarchy, pollution taboos and the division of labor function to produce solidarity in a social organism, then one's attention almost automatically shifts to the ways in which caste and customary rights were about control or ownership of sources of sustenance and wealth. In contrast to capitalist societies in which livelihoods are rarely seen as fixed or permanent, tributary-agrarian societies tended to see the world as composed of relatively fixed sources of wealth. A farmer's land may have been the emblematic example of such a fixed livelihood, but the livelihood of the butcher, brewer and baker were not any less fixed. Nor, for that matter, were those of the priest and the prince. The organization of production in tributary-agrarian societies was thus fundamentally about the control of these livelihoods, that is to say, the ownership of them. Castes were a mechanism of such control and, in that way, were not so different from ancient Roman *collegia* or medieval European guilds – although castes were strictly endogamous, far more hierarchical and far more pervasive. All of this will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 3.

Caste in Contemporary India

As mentioned above, it is quite unclear that the day-to-day experience of caste ever had anything to do with the divisions found in the Laws of Manu. As far as I was able to observe during my

fieldwork (in early twenty-first century Delhi), the strongest binding force of the of caste came from the practice of endogamy itself. Because young people had to marry within their group, because marriages are arranged, and because family ties are seen as more stable and trustworthy than other types, the most significant relationships in most people's lives come from within this grouping (L. Dube 1996, 11; D. Gupta 2000, 139; 2004; S. K. Mitra 1995, 57; Disha 2023). Moreover, weddings, which tend to be large even for the poor, offer very regular opportunities to socialize and get entertained, thereby playing a big role in establishing connections and affective bonds. Because business and future wedding arrangements are also often made at weddings, they also serve a strong practical function. Beyond weddings, there are many other caste-oriented events: some to do charity for the caste, some to help its political representatives, and some to honor religious or historical figures esteemed by the caste members. The institution that is worth calling a "caste" in contemporary India, I would argue, is this endogamous grouping.

During my fieldwork, the word *samaj* was the most commonly used word to describe caste. People would regularly refer to "*Balmiki Samaj*," "*Jatav Samaj*," "*Kumhar Samaj*," etc. They would also regularly say "*mera samaj"* ["my society"] or "*hamara sama*j' ["our society"]. The English word "community" was also frequently used as a loan word to Hindi. The word *quom,* which can refer to caste but can also refer to religious community (which is reproduced in a very similar way at the local level) was also somewhat common. The word *jati,* the significance of which will be discussed in greater detail below, was only occasionally used and carried a negative connotation when it was used; for example, people would sometimes say "*jatiwad*" to refer to the concept of "casteism."

The experience of caste hierarchy is a complex affair in a twenty-first century urban setting. The types of hierarchy establishing practices that are described in the classic social science literature on caste are very rarely encountered. For example, the rules pertaining to the sharing of food and the *hookah* (commensality) were very important to the maintenance of caste boundaries (Marriot 1955). I never encountered such a rule being openly followed in Delhi. This, by the way, was in direct contrast to my experiences in the much more conservative city of Varanasi. Well-to-do, urbane members of the higher castes tend to eschew any explicit sense of superiority, leaving their privilege largely unexamined – like most white Americans. I am in no way claiming that such practices have disappeared. Ranges of conservatism do of course exist and one may still encounter high caste Hindus in Delhi who engage in various hierarchical practices.

Another way that many Indians experiences caste is through the official government classification system. From the implementation of the Indian constitution until the present day, the Government of India has had a system of positive discrimination that reserves jobs, university seats and elected positions for people of the lower castes. The policy is popularly known as the "reservation" system. The calculations for these reservations are extrapolated from pre-independence information because, ironically, the Indian census is not allowed to collect data on caste (Bhagat 2006, 127). A list or schedule of castes and tribes who were deemed sufficiently "backward" to merit positive discrimination was drawn up in 1950. The castes and tribes on this original list are known as Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) and 22.5% (15% for SCs and 7.5% for STs) of government jobs and university seats were reserved for qualified members of these groups (Upadhyaya 1998). In 1990 another 27 percent of

positions were reserved for groups known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs), meaning that nearly half of all government jobs and university seats are now part of the system of positive discrimination (Jaffrelot 2000b, 94). Article 330 of the Indian Constitution reserves parliamentary seats for SCs and STs based on their population (taken as a whole group) while Article 332 does the same thing for state legislative assemblies (Singer 2012, 205). During my fieldwork, there were four Balmiki Members of Delhi's Legislative Assembly, two of which had won in seats reserved for SCs.

The precise history and politics of the reservation policy in India is complicated and regionally variant. What is important for our purposes is that it forms another moment of interpellation into caste identification. To qualify for benefits, members of the SCs, STs, and OBCs must apply for a certificate proving that they belong to such a caste (Shinde 2016). The castes and tribes that the government recognize are those endogamous groups mentioned above, whose names are cataloged in commission reports. The Kalelkar commission of 1955 listed 2,399 SCs and STs such groups and the Mandal commission of 1980 listed 3,743 OBCs, the Anthropological Survey of India found 4,635 SCs in all of India (K. S. Singh 1992). These large and discrepant numbers show the tremendous regional variation, complexity and flux that exists within the caste institution of caste.

The Governing Structure of Delhi

As alluded to at the beginning of this chapter, the governing structure of Delhi is more complex than is typical of other places in India. Currently holding the special designation of National Capital Territory, Delhi was, during the Raj, classified as a Chief Commissioner's

Province. In 1956, it became a Union Territory, a type of polity that was more directly controlled by the central government. In 1991, the area was designated the National Capital Territory and given a legislative assembly but one with less autonomy than that of a typical Indian state. This arrangement makes the NCT similar to the city of Chandigarh and the province of Jammu and Kashmir (the latter up until 2020). The NCT is overwhelmingly urban although significant agricultural areas do exist, especially in its northern and western parts.

Between 1991 and 2012, the vast majority of Delhi's 14-plus million people lived under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Within this area lay most of the Mughal-era city known as Old Delhi and the massive Red Fort which housed the late Mughal emperors. The MCD surrounds the New Delhi Municipal Corporation, which covers the nation's current capital, including its parliament building. A military area with a large civilian population known as the Delhi Cantonment also existed and provides its own municipal services (it still exists) (it still exists). In 2012 the massive MCD was divided into three smaller entities, the North Delhi Municipal Corporation, the South Delhi Municipal Corporation and the East Delhi Municipal Corporation but it reunified in 2022. As the fieldwork of this dissertation was done in 2004 and 2005, this division and reunification is not relevant.

Political power in the National Capital Territory is also rather complex and unusual. Like states, it has a parliamentary body known as the Legislative Assembly that is headed by a Chief Minister. But, in contrast to full-fledged states, the Legislative Assembly and Chief Minister of Delhi must coordinate with the Lieutenant Governor of the NCT, an appointee of the President of India with executive power but bound by the supreme court to act only only in an advise-and-consent role. Because the NCT is so heavily urban, day-to-day concerns like sanitation, traffic,

electricity and property taxes are issues of major political concern to the ruling party and so they often play a more prominent role in those policy areas than the mayors of the various municipalities, although the latter technically have jurisdiction over such matters. The visible and palpable power in the urban areas of Delhi thus lies primarily with the Chief Minister, who often appears more like a big city mayor than the leader of a state government. Between 1998 and 2013, Sheila Dikshit of the Congress party was the Chief Minister of the NCT of Delhi. She implemented a number of projects aimed at improving the appearance and sanitary conditions and sanitary conditions of Delhi that will become relevant in Chapter 5.

Delhi's Sanitation Systems and its Workers:

In early twenty-first century Delhi, the official portion of Delhi's solid waste system was fairly easy to understand. Households in an authorized neighborhood deposited their garbage in a fixed dumpster called a *dhalao*. From there, it was taken by truck to one of the large dumpsites in Bhalswa, Ghazipur or Okhla. An important fact about Delhi's sanitation system at the time was that the municipal governments did not collect garbage or recycling from individual households or residential complexes. This critical work was done either by household servants, by a network of informal workers or, in a few cases, by informal workers who had been regularized by homeowners' associations and NGOs (as we shall see in Chapter 5). With this basic fact in mind, the most convenient place to start this description of sanitation work in Delhi is with a categorization of different types of sanitation workers that operate in the NCT. For the purpose of this project, the sanitation workers of Delhi can be divided into six categories: municipal *safai karamcharis* (sanitation workers), informal door-to-door garbage collectors,

scavengers, *kabariwallas* (door-to-door recyclers); ragpickers and household servants. Below is a description of each:

1. Municipal *safai karamcharis* (sanitation workers) who are formally employed by one of the several governing entities that control the National Capital Territory. Most of these workers are what are known as known as sweepers, which means that they sweep the streets with simple brooms, gather up the refuse into a wheelbarrow and cart it to a dumpster (*dhalao),* from where it is hauled away to one of a few landfills. Many *safai karamcharis* are also sewer workers who do the extremely dirty and dangerous work of clearing and maintaining sewer lines. During the time of my fieldwork, street sanitation and garbage removal fell primarily under the jurisdiction of the Department of Conservancy, Sanitation and Engineering. In April 2005, the department employed 34,606 regular (i.e., permanent) Safai Karamcharis and 17,668 temporary Daily Wagers.[5] Another 2,184 safai karamcharis work for the Delhi Jal [Water] Board, primarily doing the unpleasant and unsafe work of cleaning the sewers. The New Delhi Municipal Corporation, the Delhi Cantonment Board and the Indian Railways also employ their own *safai karamcharis.*

2. Informal door-to-door garbage collectors take the garbage from some individual households to the *dhalao.* These workers usually hold monopoly rights over a list of clients, a form of proprietary livelihood that will be explained in detail in Chapter 2. These workers also collect much of the mid-value recyclables that were not sold to the *kabariwallas* and they frequently clean household toilets as well.

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[5] Interview with Mr. Ravi Das, Director in Chief of the Department of Conservancy, Sanitation and Engineering on 4/26/2005

3. Scavengers, who clean out dry latrines (mentioned above). "Scavenger" and "Manual

   Scavenger" are Indian English terms used for people who remove night soil by hand

   (Ramaswamy 2005, 2). The existence of this practice has long been reviled by social

   reformers, including Gandhi. They paint horrifying and (true) images of people

   removing the nightsoil with their bare hands and carrying it in wicker baskets on their

   heads only to have it leak on their heads (Barve 1952; Gulalia 2003; Malkani, 1965;

   Pathak 1991; Ramaswamy 2005; Srivastava 1997). Multiple government commissions

   and programs have been set up to eliminate this practice. One of India's most famous

   and well-funded NGOs, Sulabh International, takes the elimination of manual scavenging

   as its mission (Singh 1998). People who are successfully steered away from scavenging

   are said to be "rehabilitated" and put on "a road to freedom (Pathak 1991)." According

   to a government agency that specializes in this project, Delhi had approximately 412,00

   rural and urban dry latrines in 2001 and17,420 "unrehabilitated" scavengers (National

   Commission for Safai Karamcharis 2007). The problem that was found by those

   interested in this mission was that scavengers did not want to give up the practice because

   they, as I have described, had a system of customary rights that granted them ownership

   over an area or a client list (Barve 1952; Malkani, 1965). This proprietary livelihood

   provided them with a very meager but nevertheless steady in-kind or cash income. Even

   some newly settled areas, such as resettlement colonies, get built without sewer systems

   and these places draw in new scavengers. Given the continued draw of the practice, the

   social reformers made it their mission to replace dry latrines with either flush toilets or

   with double-pit composting toilets (Pathak 1991). If they are ever successful these social

reformers will undoubtedly keep people from lives of tremendous social stigmatization and biological danger. But, given the chronic poverty and unemployment in India, one wonders if all the rehabilitated scavengers will be able to match their old incomes. More to the point, one also wonders if, as I am arguing regarding other sanitation workers, the pull of the customary rights is not only its (meager) income but also its ability to insulate families from the ravages of expropriated freedom.

4. *Kabariwallas,* who buy *kabari* (reusable and recyclable garbage) from households and businesses and then sell it to mostly private-sector recycling businesses. Historically, the *kabariwallas* purchased mainly glass, metal and newspaper but more recently they have taken an interest in a wider variety of items, all of which have become part of India's widening recycling industry (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2010). I was told by friends in the Balmiki community that they were not members of the Balmiki Samaj but that they held monopoly rights over certain territories, but I cannot confirm this as I did not do any primary research with this group of workers. I did regularly sell my old newspapers and bottles to the *kabariwallas* who went around their territories on bicycles or cycle rickshaws and called out "kabari, kabari."

5. Ragpickers, who extract low value recyclables from the neighborhood *dhalaos* (fixed, concrete dumpsters). They primarily pull out rags which then get recycled into packing materials like egg cartons. This is work is not only unpleasant but very dangerous as they can encounter needles, broken glass, hazardous material and, of course, multiple disease vectors. Many NGOs and government schemes have targeted ragpickers over the last several decades (Kolluri 2017; Palnitkar 2002; G. Wolf, Ravishankar, and Sen 1999).

6. Household staff (never referred to as *safai karamcharis*) play a major but largely unseen role in sanitation work. Less conservative households who are less concerned about purity and pollution rules may not engage a door-to-door garbage collector. For such households, it is often the household servants who are responsible for taking garbage from the wealthier homes to the *dhalao* (fixed dumpsters). We will see in Chapter 5 that these workers are often blamed by neighborhood associations for leaving garbage on the streets. In my experience, these householders still tend to engage a private *safai karamchari* to clean their toilets and those workers usually also work as door-to-door garbage collectors. Some conservative families of higher castes do not allow their servants to handle garbage or clean toilets due to purity/pollution concerns and these households tend to engage door-to-door garbage collectors for both garbage disposal and toilet cleaning.

This dissertation will primarily be be concerned with the municipal *safai karamcharis,* the door-to-door workers and the wider Balmiki community to which both groups overwhelmingly belonged.

Where Balmikis Live

Like people of other castes and communities, Balmikis tend to cluster together with other Balmikis. Balmiki neighborhoods are scattered throughout the National Capital Territory. In the city, they primarily live in *jhuggi-jhompri* clusters (shantytowns) and areas that are known as "resettlement colonies." The latter are large areas, primarily on the outer parts of the city, where the people who used to live in unauthorized *jhuggi-jhompri* clusters were forcibly moved as part

of various slum clearance programs. Resettlement colonies are planned communities consisting

of small plots that are allotted to each family (the allotment has steadily gone down over the

decades). Spaces are also designated for schools, parks, temples and other civic amenities. The

people are usually expected to build their own houses. In many cases the colonies start out with

running water as the only form of public amenity. Electricity usually came relatively soon

afterwards while sewer systems often took decades to arrive. The several resettlement colonies

that I have visited are very distinctive for their neatly laid out streets with small plots and small

houses. Residents told me that, once the colonies have full infrastructure, they are reasonably

pleasant places to live except for the fact that they are far away from places of employment.

All the Safai Karamcharis who work for the Municipal Corporation of Delhi were

officially allotted housing with their positions. Few, however, actually received them and a large

backlog existed. Several complexes of what are known as Class IV housing had been built for

the S.K.s but not nearly enough for the entire workforce. A good portion of my fieldwork

occurred in one of these complexes called Sangam Park. It consisted of numerous 4-story and a

few 2-story concrete apartment blocks. Most of the units were held by *safai karamcharis* but

some had been sold to members of other communities. Many of the two-story units had been

allotted to victims of the 1984 anti-Sikh riots. Each unit was 500 square feet and had two rooms,

a partially exterior kitchen area, a small washroom and a single, exterior toilet room. The blocks

were arranged in pairs with exterior staircases connecting the two blocks in a ziz-zag pattern that

forced people to walk past one another's front doors. People on the ground floor built extensive

unauthorized additions to their homes, including small animal stables for goats and pigs. Second

floor residents often cooperated with their downstairs neighbors to use the roofs of their

additions as balconies, which sometimes also get roofs and walls. People on the fourth floor would often cut a hole through their roofs to make unauthorized additions above, creating a fifth floor. Unfortunately for the residents of the third floor, they could not make additions. All the additions gave the formally planned neighborhood the feel of a *jhuggi-jhompri* cluster – making it, as one would expect, more lively and interesting but also more chaotic and dirty. The wide and straight streets of its plan were now narrow and irregular. Interestingly, the park areas were hardly encroached upon by private residents although some small unauthorized shrines had been built within them. Although Sangam park was a-typical in the sense that it was a government apartment complex, the residents themselves had turned it into something that looked and felt like the typical sort of urban neighborhood in which most Balmikis lived.

Conclusion

This goal of this chapter has been to provide a broad overview of the relevant context needed to make my argument about transparently social wealth among the Balmikis in India. The major components of that context are (1) the caste relations and histories relevant to the formation of the Balmiki Samaj and its economic conditions, (2) the basics of Delhi's governing structure, and (3) the broad workings of its sanitation system. With this basic information, it should be easier for the reader to understand the rest of this dissertation's argument.

Chapter 2
Rent Seeking from Below: Proprietary Livelihood as Resistance to Expropriated Freedom

In the introduction to this dissertation, I stated that its main purpose was to highlight and ethnographically describe the practices of transparently social wealth in the lives and cultures of Delhi's sanitation workers. As I observed in Chapter 1, existing studies of sanitation workers have provided us with some very valuable accounts of how this worldwide workforce lives and labors. None, however, have taken into account the sorts of practices that I am calling transparently social wealth. It will become clear over the course of this dissertation that accounting for transparently social wealth is important because it can help explain why so many sanitation workers seem to willingly participate in their own oppression.

In this chapter, I will focus on a particular type of transparently social wealth that I encountered among Delhi's sanitation workers, one that I call "proprietary livelihood." Within this set of practices, people do not sell their labor as a commodity according to the norms of a capitalist market. Under the norms and laws of most modern markets, a laborer enters a competitive workplace and agrees to work for a certain amount of time in exchange for wages; employer or employee can terminate the relationship at any time. Even when elaborate contracts and labor regulations make the process of ending the relationship more difficult, there is no assumption in law, ideology, or practice that the workers' jobs are permanent; firings and layoffs still occur and the fundamental presumption of the relationship is that it is a temporary

agreement for the purchase and sale of labor-time. Even less is there a sense that the job itself is

a fixed thing-in-the-world that might belong to a person or a family.

The practices of proprietary livelihood posit and presuppose a very different set of labor

relations. By "proprietary livelihood," I am referring to a genre of practice in which people do

not sell labor for distinct periods of time but, instead, "own" their jobs. Their rights over their

positions do not follow a bourgeois or capitalist model of ownership, but they can nonetheless be

considered a form of ownership. When the jobs are purchased for the first time, they are done so

on the assumption that the owner cannot be dislodged and that a perpetual stream of income and

other benefits will emanate from the position. Once their purchase is made, the practices of

proprietary livelihood allow the owner of the position to do some combination of renting out the

position to others, bequeathing it to beneficiaries, and selling it to other purchasers. In some

cases, all three actions are possible, which means that the positions are treated almost exactly the

same as real property. In all cases, the owned position imposes obligations on the owner: he or

she must either either work to some minimum standard or ensure that such a minimum standard

of work is performed by somebody else. The positions also inevitably carry a lot of other

obligations (such as community participation or additional fees), but their owners face no

competition and cannot be terminated. As the details of their work arrangements get elaborated

below, it will become clear that the people I encountered in my field site effectively owned their

jobs. It will also become clear, I hope, that the term "proprietary livelihood" is appropriate for

describing their relationship to their work and their income.

It should come as no surprise that sanitation workers wanted to own their jobs. This

ownership got them a combination of higher wages, job security, and a slew of other benefits that

they could not have obtained on the open market. As I mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, economists would categorize proprietary livelihood and most other forms of transparently social wealth as forms of "rent-extractive" and "rent-seeking" behaviors. Because I follow Marx in believing that mainstream economists are the spokespersons of the commodity form (Marx 1976, 177), I also believe that it is necessary to dialectically engage their language. In this spirit, I regularly describe proprietary livelihood in terms of rent. In its technical economic sense, any gain over an opportunity cost is a rent,[1] but the gains I'm describing here are obtained through anti-competitive practices and so they not only exemplify rent in that very broad sense but also in the narrower sense expressed in the concept of rent-seeking behavior.

Readers should be neither surprised at nor disdainful toward the sanitation workers or any other workers in Delhi for engaging in these acts of "rent-seeking from below" – as I like to call them. These rent-seeking practices occurred in the prevailing context of what I have been calling expropriated freedom – the default condition of capitalist/modern society. Whereas relative prosperity and reasonably good social safety nets would have made rent-seeking from below less appealing in wealthier countries, it was understandably appealing to the low caste and low income people of this study who are condemned to survive on the thinnest of margins in destitute slums (Antony and Maheswaran 2001). The very meager wages of such people were supplemented by a woefully inadequate ration card provided by the government, but many poor Indians were forced to sell even this small asset in order to meet their short term needs (Dutraj and Chhetri 2023). Were they not to engage in the acts of rent-seeking from below, hunger and homelessness would lurk around every corner.

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[1] The complexities of the concept of rent are explored much more thoroughly in Chapter 4.

Proprietary livelihood was no ticket out of poverty because obtaining a livelihood was very expensive, especially if the money was borrowed on the extortionate terms of the informal credit markets. As much as a path to higher wages, the sanitation workers' desire to own their livelihood was an attempt to resist the ravages of expropriated freedom. And these ravages were more than just low wages and economic insecurity; they involved the loss of control of one's own labor and a loss or complete absence of a social *location*, the sort of location that would give a *family* sufficiently good assurance of continued sustenance over a multi-generational, indefinite time horizon. Such a social location provided not only a sense of economic security but also the sense of permanence that allowed one to come in from the margins of one's community. To the extent that proprietary livelihood is a form of rent seeking or rent extraction, it is one that helps the sanitation workers resist the ravages of proprietary livelihood.

This chapter will describe the practices of proprietary livelihood as they occur among the two categories of sanitation workers that form the core of the study: the informal door-to-door garbage collectors and the municipal street sweepers known as *safai karamcharis*. The narrative below is based primarily on data taken from a combination of formal interviews and informal conversations with the sanitation workers themselves as well as members of some Resident Welfare Associations, individual middle-class homeowners, and officials of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. Because much of what I discussed with the workers was illegal and because many of them had to be approached in rather unconventional ways (e.g., just approaching them as they were working), recordings were not always possible, and thus much of what is presented below is based on field notes.

The Door-to-Door Garbage Collectors of the Informal Sector

Among the different categories of sanitation workers in Delhi, it was the work arrangements of

the informal, door-to-door garbage collectors who best exemplified the practices of proprietary

livelihood. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the city of Delhi did not collect garbage from individual

homes.[2] As was also mentioned, each neighborhood of Delhi has a fixed concrete garbage

dumpster called a *dhalao* at which local garbage is amassed before being taken by municipal

trucks to one of the city's landfills. Although a few resident associations and NGOs had just

started their own small-scale programs of door-to-door collection[3] services, the vast majority of

homes in the early twenty-first century were expected to take care of this task themselves. Some

households would have their own servants do this and, in some less well-off areas, the residents

would perform the task themselves. However, a great many homes, especially in the wealthier

areas, preferred to have someone outside of the household collect the garbage. Very frequently,

the same person would clean the toilets too. For some strictly Brahminical households, this was

due to ritualistic concerns of pollution as they did not want the servants who prepared their food

also to be handling garbage and cleaning toilets. Many others, even in not so wealthy

households, preferred to have outsiders take their garbage to the *dhalao* for more ordinary

reasons of status and convenience.

Unbeknownst to most homeowners, however, is that they would not be able get another

garbage collector to service their houses if they were to become dissatisfied with the services of

their collectors; they could refuse to pay but no one else would come to take the previous

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[2] In recent years, door-to-door collection has been steadily increasing throughout the city. See: "In South Delhi, RWAs against shut dhalaos being used as shops" by Paras Singh. *Hindustan Times,* online edition. 3/26/2023. Accessed on 10/16/2023.
[3] More details about such programs will emerge in Chapter 5.

garbage collector's place. Their household (most likely) belonged to the client list of that

particular garbage collector, who, with the help of family and friends in the Balmiki community,

would have prevented others from contracting with any of the households on the list. Also

unbeknownst to the homeowner would be the fact that the garbage collector can sell, gift,

bequeath and even rent out his or her client list to other garbage collectors. When the list was

transferred, it was not only the simple list of addresses that was being transferred but, much more

importantly, the right to exclude others from contracting with the people on the list. After such a

transfer, the householder would have to either accept the new garbage collector or have people

from within their own home do the work.

It should be clear that the relationship of garbage collectors to their client list is a

proprietary one: they can exclude others from its use, they can charge a rent in exchange for the

permission to use it, and they can also transfer it through sale or bequest. As we shall see later in

this chapter as well as in the next, the relationship of ownership does not and *cannot* fully

conform to the bourgeois-capitalist model of ownership, but it does nevertheless constitute a

form of ownership.

The informal garbage collectors usually referred to their client lists with the Hindi word,

"*ilaka,*" which literally translates to "area." Because they used this word, I initially had the

impression that that these workers had some sense of ownership and responsibility for the streets

and other public spaces that surrounded their clients' houses, but it turned out that they had one-

to-one relationships with each household and that the relationship was confined to removing the

garbage and sometimes cleaning the toilets. Though clients on each list tended to be clustered

fairly closely together, they were never perfectly contiguous and so their relationship was really just with each individual household.

Another word that was sometimes used to describe their client list was *huq*, or "right." None of the garbage collectors used the word *sampati* (the official word for property) to describe their list but they did reply affirmatively when I used that word. Regardless of the words that they used, we will see that they treated these client lists as forms of property.[4]

Any and all proprietary rights only exist as rights in so far as they are they are recognized and enforced by a community of people. If I may be permitted to briefly state the obvious: most property rights in the modern world, including those in India, are recognized, recorded, and enforced by the self-proclaimed sovereign entity of the land, that is, the state. Since the rights of the garbage collectors were not recognized by the government, they needed a community of people that was bound together by a high degree of familiarity and trust. The Balmiki caste provided exactly this type of community. Though most of the traditional features of caste in Delhi had withered away by the turn of the twenty-first century, one feature that remained very strong was the practice of endogamy (Jaffrelot 2000). This practice, combined with certain other solidarity-producing institutions (like the celebration of Valmiki Jayanti), meant that Balmikis tended to be able to socially locate one another by tapping their networks of extended kin and associates. To poach the clients of another Balmiki would thus have had serious social repercussions. The proprietary feeling that typical garbage collectors had toward their client lists and, perhaps more importantly, the *security* of that feeling, was thus enabled by the existence of the caste community of which the garbage collectors were a part.

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[4] The specific nature and history of this property ownership will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

For these same reasons of trust, the garbage collectors did not want other groups moving into the business of garbage collection. Based on my own personal experience, Indians widely assumed that people band together along caste, ethnic, and religious lines to defend their own economic interests. Most people thus further assumed that they themselves had to do the same within their own group even though they may not have wanted to live that way. Being members of an ultra-low status caste who often called themselves the "Dalits of the Dalits," Balmikis often felt that discrimination effectively barred them from entering other professions and thus that they had to zealously guard their position in the sanitation field. So, when a client list was to be sold, the current owner did not advertise the asset in a newspaper and simply sell it to the highest bidder.[5] Instead, they mobilized their social networks in a process that was not so different from finding a spouse for one's kids. The buyer was usually a relative, and quite often a fairly close one. Indeed, their possession, usage and transfer of the client lists were treated more as community affairs than exchanges between autonomous individuals. As in marriage arrangements, an exchange is involved but it is not a simple sale to the highest bidder. Their client lists, the thing that they called an area or an *ilaka* was thus seen as a community asset as much as an individual one. More to the point, the client lists had to be treated as such because, without the context formed by the Balmiki community, there would be no client lists to possess, use, or transfer.

This overview of the economic arrangements of the informal door-to-door collectors in Delhi[6] allows us to examine a bit more deeply the social relations that I am trying to describe with the term "proprietary livelihood." Because the "thing" owned was a livelihood, it

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[5] Because their proprietary rights were only recognized and enforced by other Balmikis, public advertisements would not have made sense.

[6] For a description of a similar arrangement in Jodhpur, see Sahai (2005).

challenged the capitalist parameters of the sort of object that could be counted as property.[7] The

thing owned was neither land nor movable property; it was not a physical object at all. Certain

types of non-physical objects, like patents, copyrights, and corporate shares, can, of course, be

accepted as property under capitalist relations when they are made to behave like physical

objects through legal fictions. In the case at hand, however, the thing owned was in essence the

opportunity to generate a livelihood for oneself through the monopolization of certain services to

a group of clients, which meant that the thing owned involved the forceful prevention of some

people from entering into contracts. Such a "thing" clearly violates market principles and could

thus never be acceptable within bourgeois-capitalist ideology. In the next two chapters, I will

actually make the point that the relations described by proprietary livelihood are not as different

from other types of property as they seem at first glance but that they threaten the bourgeois-

capitalist order because they are arranged in such a way that they don't conceal the fact that they

are grounded in community relations (including the use of force). Regardless of the precise

nature of the property, it is clear these practices involve a kind of ownership and that this type of

ownership does not conform to bourgeois-capitalist ideology; it is these practices that I am

calling "propriety livelihood."

During the time of my fieldwork, I received many clues that suggested that proprietary

livelihood practices were not unique to garbage collectors. Although I was not able to

thoroughly investigate such practices among other groups in other situations, I think they still

warrant a brief mention. I was told by multiple people that the newspaper deliverers also had

client lists that they jealously guarded. The providers of satellite-driven cable television were

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[7] The specific nature and history of this property ownership will be discussed at length in Chapter 3.

also said to have very local monopolistic tendencies. At that time, it was quite common for some very local entrepreneur to set up a TV satellite dish and then sell cable connections to his or her neighbors. These service providers too coordinated with one another and respected the micro-monopoly that each provider had in their particular areas. Ironing and laundry services seemed to be another example. Most middle and upper-middle class neighborhoods in Delhi were served by small, family-run laundry-folding and ironing and ironing services. These *istree-wallahs*, who were often members of the Dhobi caste, usually had outdoor work benches set up by the side of the local roads on which they worked. These stands were not usually permitted by zoning regulations, but the local residents tolerated them and sometimes lent them a small amount of their private property because they valued their services. Because they usually hand-delivered the folded clothes, they had a pretty good sense of who was using their services or not. Although they could not keep a resident from using another *istree-wallah*, they could control the delivery of the folded clothes. My local *istree-wallah* told me that generally he and the other *istree-wallah* families and the residents respected each other's *ilaka* and that there was never any need for conflict or competition. To reiterate, I was never able to go into greater depth about the precise economic arrangements of these workers, so I don't know if they saw their territories and client lists as transferable forms of property. There, were, however, many clues to suggest that they, like the Balmikis, had mutually agreeable methods of limiting competition and protecting their own livelihood.

A relevant story about a school in Kerala also came to my attention. At that school, teachers were, in essence, made to purchase their jobs in the guise of a voluntary, charitable donation. A very close personal contact is a co-owner, benefactor, and board member for a

private, non-profit school that receives some government funding. This person mentioned to me, in a very off hand way, that when new teachers were being hired, they were expected to make a donation to the school. Upon my inquiry, he explained the logic behind the donation: because the school will be providing the new teacher something of great value (a teaching job from which they can almost never be fired) the new teacher should, in exchange, make a donation to the school's capital fund. The donations were officially voluntary and technically legal contributions meant to be used for the maintenance of the buildings, classroom equipment and the like. Yet everyone knew the donation was required in order to get the job. It was a more-or-less set amount and, of course, the teacher had to be qualified for the job, so the jobs were not simply being sold to the highest bidder, but there was a kind of entry fee required to obtain the opportunity to sell one's labor – the price of which itself was not really determined on the open market because the jobs were almost impossible to lose.

One of the surprising aspects of this story was the casualness with which my personal contact told it to me. He had been living and working in the US for decades but, to him, the system of "donations" seemed completely normal and legitimate. The Catholic schools in the area did it that way too, he told me. The only problem at the school, as far as he was concerned, was that top school administrators were siphoning off a lot of the donation money for their own personal gain. With this case, too, I was not able to obtain greater detail: to what extent, for example, did existing teachers expect to be able to secure a position for their own children? I hope to research this and the other cases I mentioned in more detail in the future, but, for now, I think these anecdotes offer some good clues that sources of livelihood were very frequently seen as controllable resources, as things to which access could be restricted by particular people. In

this way, jobs and other sources of livelihood were (and still are) being treated as proprietary objects in a manner that is not so different from housing or land. As with those things, control of these resources can yield a significant rent. These anecdotes also provide some evidence that practices of proprietary livelihood are remarkably persistent and are only gradually being displaced by the capitalist culture of "hire and fire."

Discovering the System of Proprietary Livelihood

I first came to know about the door-to-door garbage collector's system of proprietary livelihood from a prominent Balmiki scholar and lawyer named Bhagwan Das[8]. Sometime around 2004, we were discussing the working conditions of sanitation workers over tea in Delhi, and he mentioned to me that local garbage collectors have a kind of monopoly over an area. He explained to me that households are not forced to contract with their local garbage collectors but that, if they did not engage them, no other garbage collectors would come to collect the garbage. I told him that it reminded me of what is known in the anthropological literature as the *"jajmani* system." He said that the arrangement was known as "*birat,*" a Hindi word derived from the Sanskrit word *vrtti*, which refers to a permanent means of livelihood assigned for common services (Oturkar and Joshi 1945, 281)[9] I asked him how I could find out more about this system, but this otherwise extremely helpful, knowledgeable, and erudite man could not actually provide much more information than that. Unfortunately, neither he nor my existing contacts in the Balmiki community could introduce me to informal informal garbage collectors.

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[8] See "The Historian of His People" by Vijay Prashad. *Outlook,* December 31, 2010.
[9] See also *The Oxford Hindi-English Dictionary* edited by R.S. McGreggor. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

I actually had to initiate contact with these workers in quite a brash manner.   I met most of the workers that I interviewed by just approaching them in the street in the mornings. I met some others through members of middle-class Resident Welfare Associations (local NGOs organized and advocated for the homeowners of a given neighborhood). I simply asked some of them to introduce me to the collectors who worked in their neighborhoods, not an easy task as these people are highly autonomous and keep their own hours. I was eventually able to interview nine workers at their homes and I shadowed two during their workdays. The garbage collectors that I spoke with referred to themselves (in their capacity as workers) as "*kurewalleh*" (probably best thought of as "garbage guys" in American English). Six of the nine workers with whom I had made contact were women, but both the men and the women would frequently bring their sons and daughters along with them as they worked. The job was treated as a sort of family affair.

When I met the first of the women, whom I'll call Sita, she was pushing a cart of garbage around the upper-middle class neighborhood of Lajpat Nagar. Her son was working alongside her and he was, interestingly, dressed to the nines in a suit and tie (it was not that hot by Delhi standards but still quite warm). She was very open and willing to talk about her work. She told me that she took the garbage from the houses and that she charged per kitchen; it was quite common for houses in such neighborhoods to have one or more additional flats that were given to extended family members or rented out to strangers, so, charging by the kitchen made sense. She said that she also cleaned the toilets of several clients as well.

I noticed that her cart was neatly organized into three or four compartments (formed out of sturdy bags) and she informed me that this was because she sorted out and sold some of the

recyclables from the garbage.   Most of the high-value recyclables – newspapers and glass bottles in particular – would have already been sold to the *kabariwallahs* by the homeowners but there were still some worthwhile items such as plastic bottles and broken glass that could be sold to the recycling depots. This supplemented her income but also left even fewer valuable recyclables for the rag-pickers to collect.

She told me that she had been working in the neighborhood for about ten years. At the time, I didn't fully understand how the garbage collectors related to their clients. I tried asking her about it using words like *birat* and *jajman.* She did not recognize those words but understood that I was talking to her about her relationship to her group of clients, what she referred to as her *ilaka.* I asked her if other garbage collectors could come into her area and she said no because she had a list of houses that belonged to her *ilaka.* She said that she had had a lawyer write up the list on stamp paper, a type of printed paper that bears a government seal and watermark and is often used for official documents. Any sort of proprietary right to aa client list would not, of course, have been recognized by the government but, curiously, she did not seem to fully understand this fact. Had she done so, she might well have chosen *not* to consult a lawyer and *not* to have the list put on government stamped paper because preventing homeowners from contracting with the worker of their choice is clearly a violation of the law. She said that she had never had any conflicts with other garbage collectors but had heard about them happening and so she was looking for the backing of something that seemed authoritative. I asked her how she came to have an *ilaka* in this neighborhood and she said that she had purchased it from her *mausa* (mother's sister's husband) for Rs. 35,000 and she said that earned a monthly total of about Rs. 3,500, working about 6 hours a day.

The other garbage collectors that I talked to all had very similar stories. Three had inherited their client lists from their parents, with one claiming that it had been in his family for four generations.[10] His sons and daughters worked with him and claimed that they would keep the client list. I asked them if they thought that they would continue to perform sanitation work. The girl remained quiet but the son said he would soon complete his 12th year of school and hoped to get a business degree and work in the private sector. I asked him if he would sell the asset in the future but he replied that he would only do so if there was an emergency because even if no one in the family wanted to use it, they could still rent it out to others. What is more important than the accuracy of these claims is what they indicate about the attitude toward the client list as an asset: it was seen as a form of inter-generational wealth and property much like land or housing.

Gender Dynamics

The gender dynamics of this inter-generational wealth unsurprisingly favored the men. Of the women I was able to talk to, only Sita, whom I mentioned above, definitively asserted that her list was *her* property. It was never made clear to me whether the father of her children was still part of her life and so she may well have been a single mother. Regarding the other families, the client lists were treated as if they belonged to the family as a whole. Such an arrangement naturally raises questions about inheritance and the division of assets in divorce. The status of this property could not, of course, be governed by the courts because the client lists are a form of unofficial property recognized only by other holders of such property. So questions of

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[10] This informant had been drinking heavily during the interview and so I'm not sure how accurate this claim was, but it does seem likely that it was part of his family from his early childhood thus would have belonged to his family for at least two generations.

inheritance and division followed customary rules; both the official law and customary rules, needless to say, heavily favor the male members of the family.

My informants gave me very vague answers about who would inherit the property and under what circumstances. All of them indicated that they would think about that question in a practical manner when the time comes but also, for all of them, questions of bequest and inheritance were deeply intertwined with the marriage market. One family raised the possibility of using the asset for their daughter's dowry. The much more common sentiment, however, was that the asset made the family as a whole more attractive on the marriage market. Even if a son could not claim the asset as *his* property, he was part of a family that held such an asset. Much like a piece of land might do, the ownership of these client lists allowed these low-income families to project an image of stability and reliability in an an otherwise very unpredictable economic world.

The work associated with the property tended to be performed by the family as whole, but from what I observed this usually meant that the women did most of the work with some help from their children. The women, unsurprisingly, also seemed to carry the burden of domestic work. Many of the middle-aged and older men were alcoholics, or so I was informed by many of the younger men of the community and so I myself witnessed. This is not to say that all the men were pure parasites on the women and children. Again, three of the nine garbage collectors that I met on the streets were men and they appeared quite diligent and concerned for their families. I should also note that I was not able to get complete information on the status of all the men in the families of the other women that I spoke to and it could well be that they were working other

jobs. Keeping in mind the limits of my inquiry, I nevertheless think that it can be fairly and

unsurprisingly concluded that the women were carrying a greater share of the burden.

As a final observation on the topic of gender, I think that it should be noted that for both

the informal garbage collectors as well as the municipal employees, the women who worked did

seem to garner respect from their children. The young men of the community generally spoke

more freely with me than the young women, so I have a much better sense of the male side of the

story. Whenever the young men spoke of their fathers, there was a certain look of disdain or

even disrespect that came on their faces, whereas the opposite was the case with their mothers.

The Resolution of Conflicts within the Balmiki Community

As mentioned, the garbage collectors identified themselves as members of the Balmiki

community, and membership in this community was vital for their economic lives. When I

gingerly asked about their caste background, they would say quite simply "*Hum Balmiki hain*"

["we are Balmikis] ["we are Balmikis] or "*Hamara samaj hai Balmiki*" ["our cast is Balmiki].

["our cast is Balmiki]. Yet, as I visited their homes and got to know them better, this did not

seem to be an especially large part of their identity. Only in one of the homes was a portrait of

Maharishi Valmiki portrayed with any sort of prominence. Like most other Balmikis that I came

to know, they appeared to have a typical syncretic mix of religious practices with a slight lean

toward Shaivism.[11] This was the case for practically all the Balmikis that I met: they considered

themselves Balmikis and they considered Maharishi Valmiki to be the patron saint of their

community, but the only time this label really seemed to matter to them was during Valmiki

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[11] Shaivism is the branch of Hinduism that devotes itself more heavily to Shiva than to Vishnu or other gods.

Jayanti (the community's major annual parade and festival), when they were trying to arrange a marriage, when they were trying get their Scheduled Caste certification and when, importantly, they were trying to *hide* the fact that they were Balmiki – something that they did not only from upper caste Hindus but from other Dalits as well. The garbage collectors that I interviewed all lived in quite disparate parts of the city but all of them reported that they lived either in shanty towns (*jhuggi-jhompri* clusters) or in resettlement colonies and that their neighborhoods had fairly large Balmiki populations.

Two of the garbage collectors that I talked to mentioned having conflicts with other garbage collectors over their lists. In one case, the conflict arose because of the change of tenants in a rental unit. The unit had been vacant for a few months. My informant believed that it belonged to her regardless of its occupants, but the other garbage collector disagreed. Several of my informants told me that rental units were the most common source of conflict. Another conflict arose because a house had been sold and acquired by entirely new owners. In that case, it was my informant who had started serving the new residents, insisting that it was his right to do so. Apparently, Balmiki customary rules are not entirely clear about whether the garbage collector has exclusive rights to serve a particular property or to serve a particular family. In both cases, the conflict was resolved by going to a *sharif aadmi* (an honorable and judicious man) (an honorable and judicious man) of the Balmiki community.

As luck would have it, I met a senior Balmiki community activist who had served as a mediator in one of these disputes. As a retired BSNL telecommunications engineer who owned a decent sized house east of the Yamuna, Mr. Shukla was known for both charitable work and for pro-Balmiki political organizing. Less militant, more educated, and more "well settled" than

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many of his counterparts, he seemed to have a good reputation among local Balmikis. I was at his house interviewing him about his activist work and I mentioned the informal garbage collectors and their work relationships. He was familiar with the ownership of client lists because he had been asked to mediate some disputes regarding this ownership. Most of the areas east of the Yamuna river had been urbanized fairly recently on what had been farm land. His area, known as Mayur Vihar, had been built up in the eighties (primarily for workers of public sector companies) and consisted mainly of single family homes of various sizes.

All this new construction meant that there were potentially thousands of new, unassigned clients for door-to-door garbage collectors. Disputes arose because the local Balmikis who had been residents of either the old villages or nearby towns in the area thought that these new territories should belong them while other Balmikis, of course, wanted to take advantage of these opportunities. Mr. Shukla was asked to mediate, which, from his description, consisted of gathering the disputants, their supporters, several witnesses, and other trustworthy people deemed to be *sharif* (honorable). *Most of* the disputes that he mediated were resolved in such a way that each person's client list ended up being either close to the city-wide average or, at the very least, adequate for earning livelihood.

Serious disputes could, I was told, occasionally result in violence but for the most part this type of mediation process was able to resolve conflicts peacefully. This mediation method apparently had its roots in older caste systems in which disputes were resolved by the caste chief and the caste council (*jati panchayat* or *nyat ganga*) (Shyamlal 1992, 48). By the time of my fieldwork (at least!), caste chiefs and caste councils no longer existed and so the garbage collectors had to turn to more *ad hoc* methods, but the process was essentially the same: disputes

were resolved through mediation by a respected member of the caste community. Dispute resolution would, of course, be vital to the existence of any kind of property right and so it can be said that the status of the garbage collectors' client lists as property was was inextricable from their membership in the Balmiki caste.

The Gains of the Garbage Collectors

Assessing the gains that garbage collectors received from their client lists is rather difficult. For those who inherited their client lists (assuming the debts associated with it were paid off), the monetary gain would have been considerable as they would have been getting wages somewhat above the market rate (Hayami, Dikshit, and Mishra 2006; A. Mitra 2004). For the garbage collectors who did not inherit their lists, the monetary gains were much less clear. The cost of purchasing a list was roughly equivalent to ten months' earnings, a very large sum for people living on the margins. If the money was being borrowed from money lenders (i.e., loan sharks), who charge exorbitant rates, then the true cost of the purchase would have been much higher.

Among the six garbage collectors who had not inherited their lists, four had relied on family members to make the payment. In two cases, they were purchasing their lists from relatives who allowed them to make the payment slowly. In two other cases, they had just cobbled the money together from family and friends who allowed them to repay with little or no interest. The two who had borrowed the money from money lenders were reluctant to talk about the precise terms of their loans, but they did affirm that they were paying a lot of interest. Interestingly, the latter two workers did not seem to be any less convinced that their purchase had

been a good investment. Upon my inquiry, one of them responded: "*Ilake ke bina, hamare pas kya? Kuch nahin! (*'without our area [area [client lists]], what do we have? Nothing!').*"

I think this statement reveals that their interest in their client lists extended far beyond the money they earned from the fees they charged to homeowners. To own such a micro monopoly had many advantages. One of the advantages that was mentioned to me was that they became more credit worthy on the informal credit market; friends, family, and money lenders were all much more likely to lend them money knowing that they had an asset that could both provide a stable income and serve as collateral. Also, the anti-competitive nature of the practices gave the workers considerable autonomy in how they performed their labor. Workers set their own hours, took vacations when they chose, and performed their work in such a way that it benefited them – maximizing the amount of time devoted to retrieving high value recyclables, working in conjunction with trusted relatives, using their own preferred methods and standards. They were not obligated to be deferential to their clients beyond what was dictated by general custom. They could also take short cuts such as, in some cases, not taking the garbage all the way to the *dhalao* or not cleaning up the mess created by their sorting through the garbage for recyclables. Owning a right to a livelihood, in short, makes a worker virtually immune to the disciplinary tactics of outsiders.   But, as we have seen, it made the garbage collectors highly dependent on the approval and support of those inside their community.

Like a piece of agricultural property, the livelihood provided by the exclusive right to work with a list of clients came together with a complex package of social opportunities and risks. If a garbage collector alienated his or her patrons, the latter would have the option of disposing of their own garbage. Conversely, if they keep their patrons happy, they could often

obtain additional work in their areas – jobs such as cleaning toilets, clearing blocked sewer connections, and similar sanitation-related tasks. Also, because the garbage collectors became regular, if marginal, parts of the communities they served, they had the opportunity to establish relationships with their wealthy and well-connected patrons. These relationships could occasionally translate into small favors, gifts, and loans. The economic advantages of owning a right to a territory thus extended well beyond the fees they received. Indeed, they could only be fully realized by cultivating interpersonal relationships of trust and familiarity. But perhaps the biggest non-monetary gains of their proprietary livelihoods were the ones I have already mentioned: their value as inter-generational wealth and their value for the family on the marriage market. And, in providing those latter benefits in particular, their proprietary livelihoods gave them a social location, one that was not dissimilar from land, one that one that kept them from falling into the bare-life margins of their community.

Regardless of whether the gains were monetary or non-monetary, they would have conformed to the economists' definition of rent: they were gains beyond an opportunity cost and, perhaps more importantly, they were gains that involved forceful interventions in the market. In Chapter 6, I will examine the concept of rent in greater detail. I would, however, like to note that, while the labeling of the garbage collector's gains as "rent" might be technically correct within the framework of neo-classical economics, such a label does not capture the full nature of those gains. Moreover, it completely obscures the social relationships through which those gains are made. As mentioned, their acts of "rent seeking from below" were strategies of avoiding the condition of expropriated freedom in which they would otherwise find themselves.

Proprietary Livelihood: Jati, Jajmani and Balutedari

I have been arguing that, were it not for their ability to own a livelihood, the sanitation workers would exist as free-floating workers in a state of expropriated freedom, the state in which a great many if not most Indians find themselves. But from what were they expropriated? As the Dalits of the Dalits, the Balmikis would have owned little or no land. Indeed, basically the only people who owned enough land to sustain themselves were those from dominant, land-owning families from a village. In this section, I will show that the ancestors of the garbage collectors were indeed expropriated from something: from their old forms of proprietary livelihood. In the process, it will become evident that the newer practices of proprietary livelihood bear considerable resemblance to those older systems.

When I first found clues that this arrangement of ownership and work might exist among the door-to-door collectors, I was myself both surprised and skeptical because I had not heard others mention it and because, frankly, it seemed just plain odd. It was when I recalled William Wiser's classic work of village ethnography, *The Hindu Jajmani System,* that I began to be able to situate the evidence tthat was before me. The book was based on fieldwork done with his wife in the late 1920s in a north Indian village and the subtitle of the work – "a socio-economic system interrelating members of a Hindu village community in services" – provides a good adumbration of what Wiser thought he had found: a system of exchange that bound villagers of different economic specializations into a single, nearly autarkic economic unit (the village). The system, according to Wiser, was founded in the caste divisions and specializations of Hindu traditions, particularly, those found in *The Laws of Manu*. The Indian village, in Wiser's account,

seemed to be a very ancient and nearly perfect example of Durkheim's "organic solidarity" (Wiser 1936, 114).

As was discussed in the previous chapter, Wiser's narrative of a functionally integrated village played a major role in shaping the image the of northern, central and southern Indian villages in mid-century ethnography, with authors such as Oscar Lewis, Adrian Mayer, Kathleen Gough, S.C. Dube, M.N. Srinivas, D.B. Miller and Susan Wadley either framing their research in its terms or assuming its reality and historical longevity. The narrative of "the Hindu *jajmani* system" was understandably challenged as romantic, orientalist, a-historical and overgeneralized by later scholars (Caldwell 1991; Commander 1983; Fuller 1989; Mayer 1993). While the precise nature, age, and extent of patronage/barter systems in Indian villages is very much in question, no one, to my knowledge, has argued that such practices never existed at all. While there is good reason to think that the mid-century ethnographers may have overgeneralized their findings, there is every reason to think that practices like them did exist and were unexceptional. Given that many of these observations took place quite near Delhi in villages such as Karimpur (Wiser 1936; Wadley 1994), Rampur (Lewis 1958), and Badipur (Miller 1975), the mid-century account of *jajmani* practice is well worth reviewing for this dissertation – especially because relatively few contemporary students and scholars of South Asia are familiar with it.

In many north Indian languages, "*jajman*" means essentially the same thing as "patron," that is, a person who materially supports others in exchange for unspecified amounts of services or goods or both. The service provider is known as the *kamin* or the *kam-karnewalla* (literally: "work-doer") and is not paid per item or per unit of time but is rather supported throughout the year by a portion of the *jajman's* wealth, (e.g., his or her harvest). Sweepers, barbers,

goldsmiths, leather-workers, carpenters, and the numerous other service providers that one might find in a north Indian village were "*kamins*" within the scope of "the system." Most *kamins* maintained relationships with a series of *jajmans,* who might themselves be *kamins* to other families. Wiser famously proclaimed, "Each in turn serves the others . . . [e][e]ach is master (xxii)," but in his own account, the central core of *jajmans* belonged to the dominant agricultural caste of the village; the food from their harvests was, after all, the primary material for exchange. In the village that Wiser observed, Brahmans were the dominant caste, but elsewhere it would often be a *shudra* agricultural caste such as the Jats, as it was in Oscar Lewis's study of Rampur (Lewis 1956, 1958). Brahman priests (e.g. *purohits*) also operated within this system, offering ceremonial and prayer services to patrons (including non-priestly Brahmans), but they were not referred to as *kamins* or *kam-karnewallas.*

Whether for Brahminical priests or untouchable sweepers, the *jajman-kamin* relationship is more than simple fee-for-service or price-for-good. The *kamins* provide services year-after-year according to certain expectations. For example, a carpenter is expected to keep a *jajman's* plows in good working order throughout the year and he is compensated through in-kind grain payments according to the number of plows (Wiser 1936, xix). The iron-worker, barber, potter, and other service providers similarly receive fixed amounts of grain at harvests. There are other pay arrangements, such as monthly payments (usually for those paying off debt) as well as daily payments and piece-rates. The sweepers, for example, usually earn a piece rate of one old chapatti per latrine or cesspool. Workers, like the carpenters, who get a fixed harvest payments may also be called upon to do daily or piece work, payments for which may be in cash or kind. The *jajmans* must, however, call upon their established *kamins* before turning to other workers;

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to do otherwise would be a major violation of customary expectations (Wiser 1932, xx). If a *jajman* were to find the services of a *kamin* inadequate and dismiss the worker, no replacement would come. They would refuse to do so. They would refuse to do so out of respect for the original person's rights and out of fear of reprisal from that person's caste--mates (Dube 1955, 67). The *kamins,* likewise, cannot work for whoever they want whenever they want; they must first get clearance from their established *jajmans* before working for others (Wiser 1932, 123). If *kamins* want to leave a village or terminate a relationship, they must first find replacements. If they fail to do so, their existing *jajmans* will take steps to prevent them from leaving (Dube 1955). S.S. Nehru even observed a case in which legal proceedings were initiated against a blacksmith who had sought to leave (Nehru 1932, 27). So, even though the *kamin-jajman* relationship may involve cash and piece rates, it is not a modern market relationship in which either party can sell as much or as little as they wish and terminate business wheneverever they like.

The in-kind and cash payments received by the *kamins,* whether annual, per-piece or otherwise, are not enough to support most of the village's *kamins* and so they depend upon various other "concessions" to support themselves and their families. Land for housing, firewood, dung, use of tools, and small farming plots are all among the many small in-kind allowances that supplement the direct payments made to the the *kamins.* Many of these, like the wood, are drawn from the village commons and virtually all of them require the *kamin* to perform more work to obtain the sustaining goods, the final value of which will vary according the weather and numerous other factors. These "concessions," then, are not payments in the familiar sense but rather opportunities for the workers to maintain themselves and their families.

The point that Wiser is trying to emphasize is that the relationship between the two sides is neither like that of a business proprietor to a customer nor like that of an employee to an employer, as Wiser writes: "The jajman when he makes a cash payment thinks not in terms of value for value received, but that the payments together with certain concessions will give the "kam-karnewalla" his livelihood" (Wiser 1936, 33). These concessions come to the *kamins* from their various *jajmans,* one providing space for housing, another for farming and others providing various other amenities. The *kamins,* then, do not simply earn payment in exchange for the work that they do; rather, each holds a position within the community. Along with this position comes both a socially determined obligation to work and a socially determined entitlement to some sort of livelihood.[12]

The holding of these social positions and the livelihoods that came with them were relations of ownership. Indeed, this type of ownership was vital to the pre-modern caste system. It is ironic that Wiser spends so much time trying to connect his nineteen-twenties observations to the ancient *Laws of Manu* when its central concept, *varna,* is nowhere to be found within his own observations. On the other hand, *jati* (caste as an endogamous, regional grouping associated with a profession) appears central to his description of the *jajmani* system. Wiser's description of the carpenters of Karimpur provides a good illustration of how this type of ownership is central to *jati* as a social institution:

> In a Hindu Village in North India each individual has a fixed economic and social status, established by his birth in any given caste. If he is born into a carpenter family, he finds himself related by blood to carpenters exclusively. All of his paternal and maternal relatives in that village or in other villages are members of

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[12] Marieke Winchell (2022, 69,93) observes similar relationships occurring among Quechua farmers in Bolivia, in which some Quechua farmers clung to their relationships of bondage even after they had been made illegal because these relationships gave them a place in a community of reciprocity (however asymmetrical), a place that came with great hardship and great obligations but also relatively stable sources of aid and sustenance.

the carpenter caste, and that alone. The men folk in all these families earn their livelihood through the carpentry trade, sometimes supplemented through agriculture. Where the village is large enough, the clientele will be limited by the boundaries of the village. If the village is not large, or the members of the carpenter families are too numerous to meet the needs of one village, the clientele extends to small neighboring villages where there are no carpenters in residence. (Wiser 1932, xix).

So, the carpenters receive a life-sustaining entitlement within the customary rights arrangements of *jajmani,* namely, a monopoly right to perform compensated service for their *jajmans.* This right resembles a form of property:

> This relationship once established cannot be broken except by the carpenter himself who may choose to sell his rights to another carpenter. It is heritable and sometimes transferable. The relationship fixes responsibilities both on the carpenter and the one whom he serves (WiserWiser 1932, xix).

The position is heritable and transferable, and, as we have seen, a virtually guaranteed and perpetual stream of life-sustaining resources. Because of these characteristics, the *jajman-kamin* relationship fits my conception of proprietary livelihood very well.

For people of low castes, especially the *safai karamcharis* (i.e., sweepers and scavengers), these resources would be minimal but nonetheless vital. But, to reiterate, it is not only the lower and middle castes who own their livelihoods in this way but virtually all the service providers in the village, including the high caste priests and accountants.

As mentioned above, Wiser's account has been criticized in many ways but none of them persuasively challenge Wiser's basic argument about the socio-economic relations of a north Indian village. Simon Commander (1983) argued that Wiser had greatly exaggerated the unity and harmony of *jajmani* practices (although the book Wiser co-wrote with his wife, *Behind Mud Walls,* shows great awareness of the tensions and inequalities in the village he studied).

Christopher Fuller (1989) argued that Wiser had generalized the priestly *purohit* relationship to artisans and laborers (although much subsequent work provides ample evidence that such relationships did exist in the place and time that Wiser was writing (see above and the next chapter). Fuller also argued that Wiser underplayed the amount of cash that was circulating in Mughal and colonial era villages (ibid.) (although Wiser clearly mentions that cash payments were also common). While there is merit to all of these critical remarks, they do not challenge the basic idea that is important to my argument: that service providers of all types had an exclusive right to provide services to certain clients and the right to be compensated for their work.

More challenging to Wiser's argument is Peter Mayer's (1993) criticism that the *jajmani* system was not only unique to north India but also unique to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a system, he argues, that developed in response to colonial policy, the evolution of a market-oriented economy and long-run changes in the labor market. In making his argument, Mayer takes on the issue of customary ownership directly. He argues that north Indian artisans and laborers were probably not engaged in the *jajmani* relations described by Wiser and others prior to the late nineteenth century; they were, instead, retained by the whole village as "village servants," much like their *mirasdar* and *balutedar* counterparts in southern and western India. *Mirasdars* and *balutedars* did have a proprietary right to their service tenure, as Mayer affirms, but, and this is where his argument becomes lessless convincing, he argues that north Indian village servants *did not* have such a right even though their social relationships were otherwise similar to those categories of workers. Mayer does not specify whether the tenure was hereditary but not transferable, indeed he provides no account of how these "pre-jajmani"

village servants were engaged at all. Mayer's argument is that, in north India, village servants began to take on dyadic relationships as land holdings became increasingly individualized on the one hand and as as the market for artisans and laborers became increasingly tight on the other. These two changes on the other. These two changes created a situation in which multiple individual farmers needed to make attractive offers to artisans and labor. The security of the *jajman-kamin* relationship would meet such a need very well. Mayer admits that some amount of speculation is necessarily involved in making his argument because the historical record is simply not clear enough. I wonder if he, like Nick Dirks (2001), was perhaps overly excited to show the Western-ness and novel-ness and novel-ness of something that had been assumed to be an ancient tradition, a critical move that was very popular in the age of post-colonial scholarship in which he was writing.

As I pointed out in Chapter 1, the structural functionalist approach of Wiser and his mid-twentieth century colleagues should be avoided and so should any implication that a given institution or practice is a component of some eternal Indian essence. Having said this, we should not let this cautionary note cause us to forget that that a variety of non-market and non-capitalist relationships have existed in India (even if the details of their precise form is unknown). Wiser's critics may well be correct, but the relationships that they describe would still create social locations for village service providers. And, to reiterate my point from Chatper 1, the families who dwelled in these locations would have been doubly doubly bonded to them.

In the next chapter, I will have much more to say about *mirasdars, balutedars* as well as other types of relationships in which people own a livelihood. What is important for us now is that, whether or not William Wiser correctly assessed the historicity of what he called the *jajmani*

system, it is clear from the anthropological and historical literature that one could possess the exclusive right to provide services in a certain village or amongst a certain group of clients. This right was recognized by the governing institutions of villages and could be bequeathed and sold (under the right conditions) and was thus a form of property.

A similar sort of arrangement occurred in urban areas. Older towns throughout India were served by manual scavengers (who cleaned out private cesspools and dry latrines) and street sweepers, usually referred to in English as "sweepers." The scavengers and sweepers of the north were drawn from the various castes that would eventually merge into the Balmiki Samaj (Prashad 2000, 91). They were paid in kind, often with stale chapattis (roti) or otherwise left over (and therefore polluted) food (Shyamlal 1992, 116–42). In the urban areas too, sweepers had customary rights to a set of client households and could sell or bequeath those rights to other sweepers (*ibid*, 118).

What this anthropological and historical literature shows is that the practices of proprietary livelihood used to be extremely widespread in India, that they were heavily caste-based and that many different castes participated in them. As commodity logic and capitalism penetrated deeper and deeper into Indian life, these practices were greatly diminished and, as people left the villages, they were indeed expropriated from a source of livelihood that was as solid as land, at least in a socio-cultural sense. It also shows that they existed for sanitation workers in both rural and urban areas near Delhi and in the old city of Delhi itself. So it is in fact not all that surprising that a modernized version of this system still exists in Delhi today. What is perhaps surprising is that the system exists in some of the most upscale as well as some of the most recently constructed parts of the city. What is even more surprising is that the formal

sector, municipal workers actually had a fairly similar attitude toward their jobs. It is to that topic I now turn.

The Municipal Sanitation Workers

What I have tried to establish thus far is that the relationship of proprietary livelihood exists among the informal sector, door-to-door garbage collectors, and that there is clear evidence that such relationships have a long history within India, not just among sanitation workers but among virtually all categories of service providers. Among the sanitation workers who work in Delhi in the twenty-first century, it is these informal workers who have what is perhaps the more ideal-typical form of proprietary livelihood, but I will show in this section that very similar relationships exist among the formal sector workers who work for (what was then) the Municipal Corporation of Delhi.

Like the door-to-door workers, the MCD workers also essentially own the source of their livelihoods. And, as with their informal counterparts, the sort of proprietary rights that they had did not fit the modern/capitalist model of ownership; it was highly restricted and involved multi-layered and vague claims on the asset. Like those other workers, the MCD workers depended on the community of fellow workers – overwhelmingly their Balmiki caste mates – to defend what amounted to rights. Also like their informal counterparts, they too are at risk of seeing their rights destroyed by privatization or a government crackdown.[13] For the informal, door-to-door

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[13] In the early 2000s, proposals for the privatization of sanitation was very much on the tabled uring the time of my fieldwork. Delhi was in dialogue with PricewaterhouseCoopers to privatize both the water delivery system and the sanitation system (see the Hindu (2004b; 2003) and PricewaterhouseCoopers (PriceWaterhouseCoopers 2005). These plans were ultimately scuttled because of the power of the *safai karamchari* unions (See *The Hindustan Times (2004)* and *The Hindu* (*The Hindu* 2004a). The SK unions were strong but so too were the forces of privatization (*nizikaran).* Anxiety about the latter was very palpable among all the Sks that I interacted with.

collectors, the recognition of their proprietary right by their caste-mates – primarily those who also own such rights – is sufficient assurance of the right (unless, as we shall see in Chapter 5, it meets the dreaded challenge from outsiders). As mentioned, the door-to-door collectors hardly seem cognizant that there is anything illegitimate about what they are doing. The social arrangements of the municipal workers, by contrast, were thoroughly permeated with obvious illegality, primarily the payment of various bribes[14] and, because these arrangements involved a government agency, they not only involved many non-Balmikis but also many Balmikis who did not themselves own a livelihood. A pall of secrecy, suspicion, and fear thus surrounded the whole process. Obtaining good information thus required a lot of trust; I was able to gain such trust because of the contacts I had made with some activists who lived in a Balmiki neighborhood that was heavily populated by MCD *safai karamcharis.*

Allow me to provide a brief overview of how the system worked for the *safai karamcharis* of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. The key thing to understand about positions as *safai karamcharis* (from here on: SKs) in the MCD is that they had to be purchased. Aspiring SKs had to pay bribes that were usually equivalent to about 10 months of the gross salary of a permanent, full-time SK – a very hefty sum for people who are already living at the economic margins. The payment of the bribe was orchestrated by representatives of the SK unions who made sure that the money discretely went to the appropriate government officials. Once an SK's position was secured, they did not immediately become a full time *safai karamchari.* They started at a level known as an *evizidar* (referred to as a "substitute" in English) who worked for about 5 days a month at a rate 108 rupees per day.[15] They then advanced to what were known as

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[14] It is interesting to note that what was a purchase price for the door-to-door garbage collectors was a bribe for the MCD workers. This was so because in the latter case the payment was known by everyone to be illegal.
[15] Interview with Vicky Lohia in Sangam Park, 4/11/2004.

"daily wagers," who received work and pay more often than the substitutes but were still part-time workers. Only after that would they become full-time workers, known as "permanent" SK's. Once they secured their position as a substitute, they were on the stairway to permanence. Though each step would require additional bribes and social networking, the only real barrier to climbing was the absolute availability of permanent positions. By the time of my fieldwork, there was a hiring freeze in effect in the MCD, so that availability had fallen nearly to zero.

Another important aspect of the system is that these jobs are not sold on an open market and so the bribe cannot be considered a simple "price" for the job. Because the system is illegal, networks of trust are of course vital to its success. The caste community of the Balmikis, reinforced by the overwhelmingly Balmiki membership of the SK unions, provided these networks of trust. So, the possession of sufficient funds to pay the bribe was a necessary condition to get the job but it was in no way sufficient. Being a member of the broad Balmiki caste community was an important prerequisite, but one needed to be "in" with the union to secure oneself a position. The payment was closer to a rite of passage, a sign of one's commitment to this community of illegality; having paid the bribe the individual SK was now as interested and as culpable as everyone else in the community and its illegality. Rather than being seen as a mere price, the bribe should be seen as a form of tribute or contribution that allowed one entry into an exclusive and secretive community, one that provided one with a livelihood, but it asked a lot in return.

Another thing to understand is that, much like the door-to-door collectors, the MCD workers tended to think of the bribes they paid as multi-generational investments. But, *unlike* their informal counterparts, they could not simply bequeath the asset to their children upon

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retirement; rather, their children also had to pay the same hefty sum. It was still a multi-generational investment, however, because once they were on the muster rolls of the MCD, they were in an SK union and thus a part of the networks needed to secure a position for their children.

Aside from the low but steady salary, SKs received multiple other benefits. For example, holding a government job of any kind was a sign of stability and thus gave one access to credit in both the formal and informal credit markets. Banks and the various government-funded credit schemes designated for *safai karamcharis* were much more likely to loan money to a person with a steady government salary than to a footloose laborer. My fieldwork showed that the formal sector SKs still seemed to prefer to borrow from the informal money lenders (i.e. "loan sharks") because the latter demanded no paperwork and asked far fewer questions than the former. They were, however, able to borrow from them on better terms than others because of their steady income. The job also came with a pension fund, which the SKs referred to simply as "fund." Interestingly, very few of seemed to value this as a source of income that would support them into old age but rather as another source of emergency money. They could withdraw money from their pension funds but doing so would cost them both penalties and additional bribes.

Another benefit of the system is that the SKs can rent out their jobs to others, a practice that was called *lahori chutna*. It was fairly common practice that the SKs would pay their supervisor (*durogah)* a bribe to allow them to sub-contract their jobs to other people. The going rate for hiring oneself a replacement worker was about Rs. 2,500 per month. If an SK job came with considerable gains, it also came with considerable costs. Beyond the initial bribes, SKs had to pay regular bribes or fees to their superiors just to to obtain their monthly pay, these bribes

were simply called *mahina* (best translated as "monthly"). They also had to pay weekly bribes to the *durogah* called *haptha* (weeklyly) to get themselves counted as present every day, even if they actually were present. Those who were subcontracting out their jobs had to pay bigger bribes to get their subcontractors counted. A bribe also had to be paid to withdraw money from their pension fund, something that was done quite often.

If, in this system, the average *safai karamchari* had to make a considerable investment in his or her job and the unions and the government officials all benefited from the system of graft, then privatization would have been a big threat because it would destroy the economy of petty bribes in favor of a system of high level, big bribes. And indeed, among my friends and informants in the Balmiki community, privatization (*nizikaran*) was frequently mentioned as a major source of anxiety. In a 2000 opinion piece that was critical of both the existing system and the possibility of privatization, the former MP and public intellectual Mani Shankar Aiyar described the plight of the sanitation workers this way:

> A tiny percentage of safai karamcharis manages, usually after decades of working with filth, to be absorbed as permanent safai karamcharis. It is a social cachet equivalent to you or I being invited to Rashtrapati Bhavan for the Independence Day reception. It is also, of course, a meal ticket to survival without corrosive fear. For fear is what rules the lives of temporary contract labour – fear of hunger, of course, but fear also of sickness and old age, fear for the family, fear, above all, of being arbitrarily and brutally thrown out of the encroachments in which they live. Permanent employment confers on the safai karamchari the right to stay undisturbed in the cesspool he has made his home (Aiyar 2009, 202).

Despite the hyperbole and disrespect, Aiyar's comments largely concord with the findings of my fieldwork. In previous generations, an SK could hope to obtain a permanent position in a more reasonable amount of time. Now, with the the hiring freeze, their ascension was almost impossible.

A common theme among the SKs that I talked to was that high caste people were taking the SK jobs. People of the upper castes, it was said, had bought their way into an SK job but never did any actual cleaning work. Whenever I pressed for details, things got a bit vague, but the important point here is not really the truth of the stories but the sense they conveyed: that these jobs "belonged" to the Balmiki community. And this sense of communal possession was not unique to Delhi. *Outlook* magazine reported on sweepers in Lucknow protesting against Brahmins taking "their" jobs:

> Lower caste workers are angry that Brahmins were stealing their jobs. "Brahmins get enrolled but they never do the menial jobs. They cannot do it. We are protesting against the Corporation, as it will mar our employment opportunities, which has been our job for ages. What will we do if they take away our jobs?' asked Shyam Lal Valmiki, President, Sweepers' Association (*Outlook* 2006).

Shyam Lal Valmiki's comments reflected a telling ambiguity: he was explicitly expressing outrage about upper castes collecting salaries for jobs that they don't perform, but, by saying "which has been our job for ages," he was betraying an anxiety that the upper castes were encroaching on livelihoods he believed to be the property of the Balmiki community.

One other aspect of MCD employment should be discussed: the practice of giving out what are known as "compassionate appointments." These are appointments to jobs given to a family member of a person who had died or become incapacitated "in harness" (i.e., on the job). The person's old job (or sometimes a different position) in the same institution is then given to the family member in lieu of a cash insurance payment. The policy of compassionate appointments exists primarily for class IV employees, but it is very widespread in the various

governmental entities India. While individual cases get disputed in the courts, the practice itself

seems to go largely unquestioned.[16]

The first report of the National Safai Karamchari Commission expressed strong support

for the policy of compassionate appointments:

> Instances have also come to the notice of the commission, where dependents of
> Safai Karamcharis who die in harness, or are retired on medical grounds, have not
> been provided with employment on compassionate grounds for long periods.
> With due regard to their socio-economic and educational status with resultant
> inability to secure employment elsewhere, the commission considers it incumbent
> on all municipal bodies to provide immediate employment to dependents of such
> Safai Karamcharis on compassionate grounds . . . In future also, dependents of
> such Safai Karamcharis should be provided with employment on compassionate
> grounds positively within a period of three months from the death or retirement of
> a Safai Karamchari on medical grounds, as the case may be (NCSK 1995, 80).

While the practice of compassionate appointments may or may not be a cost saving measure by

city governments, it certainly underscores that the jobs themselves are seen as a sort of property

that can be inherited. Because this only applies to people who were incapacitated or killed on the

job, it cannot be said that an MCD job is heritable in the same way as a garbage collector's client

list, but it cam be saod that the practice goes against market principles and confers a sense that

the job is in some way connected to the family.

Another illustrative example of proprietary livelihood among the MCD SKs comes from

the story of Mohanlal and his family. Mohanlal was a Balmiki from a village in Haryana not too

far from Delhi. At that time (2004-55), he referred to himself as a *bhangi*. As a young bachelor

in the mid-1960s, he came to Delhi to join members of his extended family who were already

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[16] See: (Prasad 2022); (*Times of India* 2023); (*Times of India* 2022)   For a recent Government of India statement on
the policy, see: https://dopt.gov.in/sites/default/files/Information%20document%20on%20compassionate
%20appointment.pdf, accessed 10/20/2023

living in a *jhuggi-jhompri* cluster (a shantytown) near the Karol Bagh section of the city. One of his extended family members had a job as a MCD *safai karamchari*. After some time, with the help of his family, he was able to get a loan from a money lender (a *sardar*) to get himself installed in the MCD. He started as a daily wager and then moved up the ranks. He got married and sometime later he was also lucky enough to get himself a small flat in a housing development project (Sangam Park) that was specifically allotted to MCD SKs. Again, through incurring more debt, Mohanlal was able to get his son installed at the MCD. His son was stuck as a daily wager for many years because hiring at the MCD had slowed down, but he did finally end up as a permanent employee. The family was considering whether or not to get Mohanlal's grandson installed. Caught between the realities of the hiring freeze in the MCD and hyper-competition in the general job market, they had a very tough choice to make.

To take another story, Geeta was a widow of a deceased SK who had come to Delhi at about the same time as Mohanlal and who managed to get a flat in the same housing development. After her husband died (about ten years prior to the interview) she got the job as an SK. I asked her how she got the job and she replied that "This is our family's job." Her middle-aged son who was also there made it clear that she got the job as a compassionate appointment. She did not actually work in the job on a daily basis because she was paying bribes and paying bribes and doing *lahori chutna*. Geeta said that even with the bribes, she still managed to keep nearly one thousand rupees a month (for doing nothing) and was able to pick up domestic work with middle class families. The family, meanwhile, had pooled their resources to obtain a position for her son seven years prior to the interview, but he was still a daily wager.

Though I didn't press the issue, given the hiring freeze, it seemed unlikely that he would ever advance to permanent status.

In another SK family that I interviewed, it was the now-deceased grandfather who had received the initial appointment in the early 1960s. His son (who was about 55 in 2005), obtained an appointment in the MCD in the seventies, and also received a housing unit in the same housing project as the others. He, his wife and his children now lived in the unit together. He reported for duty normally, but his wife, who had also gotten an appointment, had an arrangement in which she split the duties with her son who had no official appointment with the MCD at all. She said that she usually worked 1 to 2 hours a day and her son did the same (the required amount is 8 hours a day). When I asked how she managed to get away with that, she said that she paid the *durogah* 200 rupees per month, which she said was a relatively low amount because her brother worked in the clerk's office of the sanitation department. Interestingly, they had also bought themselves a cycle rickshaw to aid in the work. The MCD was supposed to provide a *reddi* – a type of wheelbarrow – but they complained that these were frequently broken and so they invested in the rickshaw so that they could get the work done more quickly. The durogah, she said, didn't care how the work got done, just that it did get done.

Not all of the SKs made these kinds of elaborate arrangements. Bhim Prakash was a sewer worker and his wife was a sweeper. Both of them fulfilled the duties of theirs job as expected – or so Bhim Prakash reported to me. Interestingly, Bhim Prakash also seemed to have a more market-oriented outlook on working. He and his wife had completed the 8th grade, and they were pushing their four kids to get as much education as possible (both the girls and the boys). When I asked if he planned to get his own kids jobs as SKs, he said that such a move

would be a last resort. He wanted them to have government jobs because such jobs offered stability and a chance of regular promotions, but he wanted them to have clerical or administrative jobs. If they were forced to take jobs as SKs, they would more likely be asked to do clerical work and would then have some chance of promotion, he reasoned, because they were educated. I don't think that the merit-based picture of hiring in the MCD that he was painting hiring in the MCD that he was painting was very accurate; it was mainly notable as the exception that proved the rule: getting jobs in the MCD was a matter of money influence, not merit. Nevertheless, even the market-oriented Bhim Prakash assumed that he could guarantee his children jobs as MCD SKs in an economy in which SK jobs pay far better than their private sector equivalents.

So, although the economic relations of the MCD workers were quite different from those of the informal sector garbage collectors, the MCD workers too existed in a set of relations that approximated proprietary livelihood. While they could not transfer their livelihood source in the same direct way as the garbage collectors, their position as an SK did give them the social access they needed to secure positions for their children. At least it did so in the heyday of the system, the post-independence decades. With the hiring freeze, the system was clearly dying, no matter how strongly the SKs were still clinging to it.

Conclusion: Rent as Resistance

What I have illustrated in this chapter is that the two categories of sanitation workers featured in this study engage in practices that I call proprietary livelihood. Procuring their proprietary livelihoods was expensive and could involve long-term debt, and, in the case of the MCD

workers, continued payments and harassment. An owned livelihood was no ticket to easy street. Beyond the material sense of security that the steady income offered to each individual sanitation worker, it gave the impression to the community that the person's family would have sustaining wealth for generations to come. Because of this aspect, an owned livelihood served as a kind of permanent social location that allowed the workers to dwell more fully in their communities. As I argued in the previous chapter, this secure location created a form of double bondage: the owner of the livelihood was bonded to a life-sustaining form of wealth and to a supportive community that guaranteed their livelihood, but they were also bonded to the constraints, frustrations and mistreatment that went hand in hand with membership in such a community.

As I have also noted, the practices of proprietary livelihood would be seen as rent-seeking practices by economists. In Chapter 6, I will argue that the concept of rent is indeed appropriate for describing the sanitation workers' practices of proprietary livelihood. I will also argue that the concept needs to be treated dialectically and historically and that, when it is treated in those ways, it becomes apparent that the concept of rent usually describes transparently social forms of wealth that challenge the modern/capitalist order in one way or another. This is true whether or not the rent-seeking is coming from "above" or "below" but, when it is coming from below, it is usually, as I have tried to show through the examples in this chapter, a strategy of resisting the commodification of labor and the more general condition of expropriated freedom that goes with it.

Chapter 3

A Few Historical Examples of Proprietary Livelihood from India and Western Europe

As I hope to have established, the sanitation of workers of Delhi did not sell their labor on a market. To qualify this statement, neither of the two groups of sanitation workers who form the core of this study – neither the formal MCD workers nor the informal garbage collectors of Delhi – sold their labor on a market in any manner that would conform to bourgeois-capitalist ideology. As I argued in the last chapter, rather than selling their labor, they "owned" their jobs, and, in this sense, had a proprietary right to their livelihoods. I had also made the case that the descriptive term "proprietary livelihood" applied to both types of workers despite the considerable differences that existed between them.

Ownership of a livelihood is by its nature incompatible with bourgeois/capitalist relations. As a form of property, a source of livelihood is neither immovable property (like land) nor movable property (like produced goods). While it bears some superficial resemblance to intellectual property, it is actually quite different in that the owner of the property has exclusive rights over a set of exchange relationships (in the case of the informal sanitation workers, this is their monopoly over a client list). This arrangement gives the owners of the livelihood a nearly guaranteed revenue stream from a more or less fixed set of people. Owning a livelihood also renders ownership of one's own labor irrelevant as one is not selling one's labor on a market but rather controlling access to particular kinds of exchange relations with particular sets of people.

It is perhaps surprising that relationships of this nature existed (and continue to exist) in

some of the newest and wealthiest areas of a globally connected megacity like Delhi, a city that

was otherwise highly dominated by capitalist relations. I was certainly surprised to discover that

such relationships did in fact exist among informal sanitation workers and I was a bit startled and

curious as to whether or not I had found something very idiosyncratic. As I described in the

previous chapter, I soon realized that the formal sector sanitation workers actually worked under

similar conditions and that, in fact, other workers like police officers were also embedded in

similar relationships (Jauregui 2010, 41). In this chapter, I will draw on secondary literature to

show that, however rare the phenomenon is now, proprietary livelihood and similar conventions

of ownership have existed in different times and places in India and Western Europe. It seems

highly likely to me, though I have not yet done the research, that proprietary relations of this sort

existed in most eras and places in which tributary relations of production[1] predominated; I say

this because they seem to be an almost unavoidable manner of organizing production when

settled agriculture is the norm but markets are not. Below, the reader will see that proprietary

livelihood also existed under absolutist and aspiring absolutist regimes. In the following

observations, I am not claiming to have discovered anything new; I am rather putting forward

what I hope will be a useful re-framing of certain types of known, non-capitalist economic

relationships.

Within the community of the social sciences, it is hardly controversial to declare that the

concepts of property and ownership along with their associated practices and institutions are

products of social relations. Rousseau, Marx, Engels, Durkheim, Weber, and many other

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[1] For a definition of the "tributary mode of production" see Eric Wolf's *Europe and The People Without History* (1982).

canonical figures in the history of the Western social thought all made this argument. Even the consummate liberal John Stuart Mill came to accept this idea later in his career (Mill 1967, 5:5:708). In understanding the social-ness of property, these authors also understood that the social relationships to which the label of "property" might be applied could vary tremendously in different historical and cultural contexts.

If the term "property" can at all be said to have a trans-historical and trans-cultural meaning, it is as some form of control over a thing. Somewhat more specifically, ownership of a thing gives the owner some amount of power to prevent other parties from accessing, using, transferring, or otherwise determining the disposition of the owned object – the property. In the words of one prominent American legal scholar of the early twentieth century: it is "the right to exclude others that is the essence of property" (M. R. Cohen [1927] 1982, 57). Anthropologists would of course insist on the social dimension of this power to exclude and thus argue that property must be considered ". . . a social relationship between persons with respect to things . . . which includes . . . rights to exclude others" (Strang and Busse 2011, 2). As we shall see below, the historical and anthropological record clearly shows that the concept and practice of property is very diverse and should not at all be seen to be co-terminal with the bourgeois or capitalist concept of private property.

On the latter topic, C.B. Macpherson noted that private property in modern capitalist society is frequently misconceived as the owned physical objects themselves, whether that be land or some type of movable thing. He argues that in fact, ". . . what constitutes property is the legal title, the enforceable exclusive right, to or in the tangible thing" (Macpherson 1978, 6). If, in the ownership relationship, the thing you possess is a *right,* then your ownership necessarily

depends on the recognition by other people of the legitimacy of that right (and the capacity of

some force to enforce it). Property and ownership are thus intrinsically social phenomena; they

are social relationships of exclusion. Macpherson assert this "enforceable exclusive right" as the

universal and transhistorical essence of property and, in this, I agree. He is also aware that the

right to exclude does not always concern physical objects (Macpherson 1978, 206) and he argues

that the parameters of this right to exclude vary greatly according to social conditions (ibid.,

205). In contrast to its medieval and early modern counterparts, he argues, the modern

proprietary right ". . . may be called an absolute right in two senses: it is a right to dispose of, or

alienate, as well as to use [freely]. . ." (ibid.). Regarding those older European proprietary rights,

he claims that multiple entities usually had rights to a single piece of land, that an individual's

proprietary right was usually limited to certain uses and that this right was anyway not freely

disposable through sale or bequest (ibid., 7). These older European rights, moreover, were

usually conditional upon the performance of a social function (ibid., 10). If the older

configuration of proprietary rights in land was different, so too was the range of things that could

be owned. Macpherson states:

> another substantial segment of property consisted of those rights to a revenue that
> were provided by such things as corporate charters, monopolies granted by the
> state, tax-farming rights, and the incumbency of various political and
> ecclesiastical offices. Clearly here too, the property was the right, not any
> specific material thing (Macpherson 1978, 7)

Macpherson brings up these various examples of medieval and early modern models of

ownership in order make his argument that it is only in the modern, capitalist framework that

property as a set of rights, which is to say, a set of social relationships, ever gets confused with

the physical objects that are owned. In earlier ages, he says, it was obvious that property and

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ownership were just configurations of rights that could involve many types of non-physical things, including duties, and so the confusion between the thing owned and right of ownership between the thing owned and right of ownership did not occur (Macpherson 1978, 7).

Like those earlier European forms of ownership, the proprietary privileges of Delhi's sanitation workers make it quite obvious that what is owned is a set of social relationships, a social location. The thing from which the sanitation workers are excluding others is the set of exchange relationships involving garbage. The sanitation workers, in that sense, "own" a set of social relationships rather than a physical asset, which is another way of saying they are involved in a *set of social relationships that give them control over other social relationships*. Because the relationships I'm describing involve ownership of more or less guaranteed sources of subsistence and thus protections from the vagaries of the marketplace, I submit once again that my usage of my neologism "proprietary livelihood" is warranted.

The examples of proprietary livelihood that I will describe below will show (1) how common of a form of ownership it has been and (2) how different it was and is from the bourgeois/capitalist model of ownership. Proprietary livelihood describes a set of social relationships that give some people the power to control access to other exchange relationships; as such, it is a set of social relations controlling other social relations. At one level, bourgeois-capitalist forms of ownership are also social relationships of exclusion and thus also involve the control of one set of social relationships by another. *But*, unlike proprietary livelihood, the bourgeois-capitalist forms of ownership mask this fact about themselves by arranging the relationships in such a way that people experience their ownership as a control of mere things.

This happens, of course, because bourgeois/capitalist ownership becomes commodity ownership.[2] For those who own a livelihood, the control of social relationships through other social relationships is quite directly experienced – with all its complexity, conflict, and social gamesmanship.

The bourgeois/capitalist model of ownership posits and presupposes a particular relationship between state and society. Under this model, society is composed of discrete, individual citizens who can own things as property. And, importantly, the model allows for only two claimants on things owned: the state and the owner (see: Mizushima 2004, 251). In proprietary livelihood, there are usually multiple layers of legitimate claimants on the asset, precisely because what is being controlled is a set of social relationships. Even in cases when a physical asset like land is at the center of the proprietary livelihood, as we shall see below, it is not the land as a discrete physical entity that is actually owned. Rather, the situation is as David Ludden describes:

> [to] own land thus meant to be a member of a family in a group of shareholders; and to own not soil itself but all the varied resources involved in one's family share. The land was not conceived as a clump of earth distinct from the social relations that made it productive (Ludden 1985, 85).

The landowners in these older conditions had a lot more in common with the artisans and laborers of their own day than with a modern-day landowner. Indeed, the relationship between land holders and their land was virtually the same as the relationship between artisans and laborers and their "jobs." So, though the words "property" and "ownership" are appropriate for

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[2] Although it is true the client lists can be bought and sold, as I described in the last chapter, there are many socially embedded restrictions on doing so and so they are not commodities is in the bourgeois/capitalist sense of the term.

what I'll be describing in this chapter, their historically and culturally specific forms deviate very sharply from their bourgeois/capitalist conceptualizations.

I previously argued that the Indian village relationships of *jajmani* and *buleta* could be accurately described as forms of proprietary livelihood and, in that light, I expressed my great admiration for Sumit Guha's insight that these practices should not be understood as unique features of India's "ancient civilization" but rather as examples of a much more widespread phenomenon of "rent-seeking and the investment of resources in creating permanent, heritable sources of rent" (Guha 2004, 98). In this chapter, I will show that my category of "proprietary livelihood" can provide much needed depth and complexity to Guha's important insight. Although Guha is absolutely correct to historicize these village practices, he overlooks the fact that his own analysis reifies the very concept of rent into an a-historical and un-dialectical category.[3] This chapter will affirm Guha's insight by highlighting multiple examples of proprietary livelihood drawn from the secondary literature on South Asian and European history but it will develop his point further by showing that these examples must be understood as more than just heritable sources of rent. It will show that they must also be understood as controllable tracts of social space*,* social *locations*, that come with various obligations and various benefits, including the enclosure of their owners in the protective – but doubly binding – embrace of community.

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[3] These are the sorts of phenomena that are often described with E.P. Thompson's term, "moral economy."

Some Examples from India

To return to my discussion of the *jajmani* and *balutedari* systems, I'd like to add one more point to my previous comments. I argued that the system of owned client lists that I observed among the informal sanitation workers closely resembled the *jajmani* system described by William Wiser nearly a century ago. I also made the case that the late twentieth century literature on North Indian and Deccan villages rightfully calls into the question the age of the system that Wiser encountered. Instead of being a part of the ancient structural essence of Indian society, as Dumont thought, the *jajmani* arrangement of work and compensation was most likely a transformation of the system of village services referred to as *balutedari,* a system that appears to have a much older history. I had also made the case that the much more important point for our purposes was that both systems can be accurately classed under the term "proprietary livelihood."

Here I wish to provide more evidence of just how extremely common the relationships of proprietary livelihood were in Indian life prior to the nineteenth century. I also wish to underscore the communal and inclusive aspect of proprietary livelihood; for livelihood to be property, property itself must be very different from its bourgeois instantiation. Additional evidence for the ubiquity of proprietary livelihood from another concept and institutional practice that was common at this time in India, that of *watan.*

Watan is an Arabic loanword that means "native land" or "home" but which, at least in the South Asian context, became almost interchangeable with *miras,* another Arabic word that more directly means "patrimony" or "inheritance" (Fukazawa 1972; cf. Guha 2004). Two scholars of the mid-century defined *watan* as ". . . *a hereditary* possession of a land or a

privilege, recognized by the community on one side and the state on the other for enabling the possessor to perform the duties associated with its possession" (Oturkar and Joshi 1945, 281).

Another Indian Scholar described the position of the one who holds the *watan* as follows:

> A *watandar* is maintained by the village. He received payment in cash and kind from the villagers for his services to them. In fact he claimed this remuneration as a matter of right, referred to as rights and perquisites or *haklajimas* in his *watan* deed (Kulkarni 1967).

Meanwhile Mily Roy (Anand) described the institutional practice in this way:

> Almost everyone in the pre-British Maratha society possessed certain rights, whether it was a right to land, right to a title, right to an occupation or right to an office. This right which was an hereditary and alienable right was called the *watan* and its holder was called the *watandar*. The term *watan* having an Arabic origin meant country of residence or home; and its tenure being hereditarily perpetuated in the family of the *watandar* so long as he fulfilled the duties assigned to his office. Therefore, it would be apt to define *watan* as a hereditary possession of land, privilege, occupation or title recognised by the state on the one hand and the village community on the other to enable the holder to perform the functions associated with it (Roy 2008, 375).

If the possession associated with a *watan* was an occupation or an office with stipulated duties, then it is easy to see how the ownership practices surrounding it are a perfect fit for my definition of proprietary livelihood. A particular occupation belongs to a person and their familial lineage, but the person can't be said to simply have a "job" in the modern sense of the term because neither the duties nor the compensation exist as they do in a modern job market. As hereditary and more or less guaranteed positions, they are simply not on a market: neither the exact amount nor the quality of the work is subject to competitive forces. And the same can be said of the compensation. Both their work and their remuneration are determined through the "extra-economic" forces of local politics but also, perhaps even more importantly, by social pressures tied to reciprocity, customary obligations, and the like. *Watandars* do not have jobs, they possess

a location in their community, which is to say that they occupy tracts of social space that come with both many benefits and many obligations.

The figure of the village headman *(patil* or *mokaddam)* makes a good example. If one looks at the situation superficially, it appears that the *patil* simply has a job. He was responsible for collecting revenue on behalf of the sovereign and was paid with a percentage of said revenue. But in fact the *patil* had a much more complex role in the village. First of all, he was encouraged to maximize the agricultural productivity of the village, a task that involved considerable intervention into its economic life. But the role of Marathi village headmen extended well beyond economics:

> they performed a number of other duties such as deciding the petty local disputes in the village community council, i.e. the *gotsabha,* organizing the village festivals and ceremonies, colonization and habitation, maintenance of peace and order and protection of the people under the area of their charges (Kulkarni 1967, 41).

Village headmen conducted the meetings of the village councils and had the sole power to enact their decrees (ibid., 42); they also presided over important ceremonies. Their compensation went well beyond a share of the revenues and fees: they received a variety of in-kind payments from the village artisans, including both products and labor, and they received the appropriate types of sweets and gifts for each of the major holidays. Often these perquisites were customary and not recorded but they were also frequently recorded in a *watan* deed or *sanad* (ibid., 42-43). The fact that these were sometimes stipulated in the deed shows that the obligations and duties of the *patil* were simultaneously ceremonial and economic. This, combined with the fact that these were hereditary relationships demonstrates that village headmen did not simply have a tax collecting

job; they owned a role in the village, a piece of social space of which tax collecting was but one of their duties.

Village headmen were not the only people who owned such tracts of social space. The *patil* had a kind of deputy known as a *chaugula* who held a similar *watan* as did the village record keeper and accountant known as a *kulkarni,* an officer who could sometimes be more powerful than the *patil* (Kulkarni 1967, 45–47).

The families of these officers were the privileged and powerful *watandars* of the village but most of the village population were either *mirasdars,* permanent land-owning families, or *balutedars* (discussed in Chapter 2) (ibid.). Both categories of families were permanent residents with heritable positions. As noted, the term *mirasdar* was used virtually interchangeably with *watandar,* showing that the distinction between holding land and holding a position like the village headman was not seen as terribly significant. In one recorded case, an eighteenth centuryeighteenth century Maratha *patil* is recorded as saying that "it is true that Goldsmith Lakshman is our old *mirasdar* brother bound through *watan"* (Fukazawa 1972, 25). The goldsmith's family was not an agricultural family, it was their position as the village goldsmith that constituted the *watan.* And the situation of the other village artisans and laborers, the *balutedars,* was very similar, as Roy points out: "their monopoly over a particular profession along with certain rights and privileges was itself their *watan"* (Roy 1993, 376). Like the wealthier and more powerful officials, the village artisans were compensated in a way that blurred the line between voluntary reciprocity and payments. Each different type of *balutedar* expected to receive certain gratuities that were in practice mandatory. Barbers were expected to be fed after each haircut and also to receive additional gifts on special occasions, including

small, ceremonial scissors. In some villages, the rope makers were entitled to the remnants of molasses and grain leftover from the main village production process. So, it appears that the socio-economic situation of the agricultural peasants and the artisans and laborers were not all that different. The former could sustain themselves through a claim to physical space. Both groups had claims to proprietary livelihood and their ownership of this social space meant that they had an enduring place in the intricate web of relationships.

As Oturkar and Joshi (1945) point out, in "eighteentheighteenth century Maratha society, any conceivable profession under the sun could conceivably be crystalized into a *watan,* so deep was the idea rooted into the mentality of the people." They go on to cite a case in which one group of brothers who had tamed some tigers and bears managed to get *watan* rights to be the sole providers of that sort of entertainment in a group of 6 villages. This example does indeed seem to suggest that the notion that families can and should own a source of livelihood was indeed normal in pre-British Maharashtra. By its very nature, such a world view posits and presupposes a social space that is divided into occupiable segments or tracts, each with its benefits and obligations.

In the broader context of Mughal north India, the distinction between having this sort of patrimonial right to some kind of office or profession and the ownership of land was not very clear at all. A peasant family (i.e., a *mirasdar* family) was in some sense the owner of the land they worked in so far as they had a permanent and hereditary right to it (Habib 1963, 114). Although this right was very strong, it was dependent on the family members' ability to ensure that the land was properly cultivated. If they were unable to do so themselves, they could sublet the land but, if, for some reason, they were consistently unable to have the land cultivated, they

could lose their right (ibid., 116). And they had to cultivate it in a manner that produced revenue for the Mughal administration. They could not freely alienate the land (ibid., 115) and when they did transfer it to another, they could not do so to whomever they chose (Campbell 1852, 346). Moreover, the peasants of the Mughal era were tied to the land in much the same way as the serfs of medieval Europe; should they leave for greener pastures, as they often did, they could be forcibly brought back (Habib 1963, 115). They belonged to the land as much it belonged to them.

So, if, on the one hand, peasant families could not freely use or dispose of their land as they chose, and, on the other hand, they could not be dispossessed of the land without egregious negligence, then this shows that land ownership in this time and place was not the same sort of relationship as it would be under bourgeois/capitalist conditions. This is partly because the Mughals, despite their desire to modernize their administrative apparatus, never managed to eliminate intermediary, landed power holders ((Richards 1993, 87) and thus never managed to create the bourgeois/modern model of ownership in which the number of claimants on the land are just two (the imperial government and the owning citizen, see above). As Irfan Habib remarked: "This means in other words in the *rai-yati* areas at least a single owner cannot be located. There were different rights over the land and its produce, and not one exclusive right of property" (Habib 1963, 118). With all these different claimants on the land, it cannot be said that the peasant family had the right to control and alienate the land itself as people would have had in the bourgeois/modern regime of ownership.

Rather, their land was a part of their social location within their communities, this location came with various perquisites, the most of important of which was the privilege of

dwelling in the village and generating sustenance from the land. But there were many other

privileges such as participating in the *panchayat* (the village council)*,* availing oneself of the

village artisans and laborers, and accessing the common village resources. This location in the

village also came with corresponding obligations such as generating revenue for the authorities,

obeying the panchayat, hiring the village workers, contributing to their payments (whether or not

one wanted to), and helping to maintain common resources (Habib 1963, 127). With these

relationships in mind, it can be said that the land was not really the thing that was owned by the

peasants; it was, rather part of the total package of benefits and obligations that came with the

social location of being a *mirasdar/watandar.*

The *watandar* and *mirasdar* families stood in stark contrast to those families and

individuals who had the status of stranger, or *uphari*. An *uphari* could be a tenant farmer who

was either entirely landless or just landless in that particular village. They could also be artisans

fulfilling some need not otherwise met in the village and, of course, they could simply be

itinerants. What made them strangers was exactly that they lacked a *watan* or a *miras* and thus

also lacked *locus standi* within the *panchayat* and other village institutions. Some of the tenant

farmers would have stayed in the village for years and thus been very familiar characters but,

still, given this outsider status, the *upari* lacked some important privileges that even low caste

watandars enjoyed*.* Economically consequential decisions were made in the *panchayat* and

disputes were also settled there. One can imagine that should any sort of dispute or accusation

occur, villagers would tend to take the side of those who had such *locus standi* and otherwise

enduring ties to the village. Not only this, but the space between villages was dangerous, as

evinced by the fact that it was the specific duty of one official to escort people from one village

to another (Campbell 1852, 84). So, it is quite clear that to be a village insider, one of its enduring members, would have been far preferable than being an *uphari*.

It is now easy to understand why the terms *watandar* and *mirasdar* were almost interchangeable. While the word *mirasdar* was more often applied to those who held land and the word *watandar* tended to refer to a broader range of hereditary rights, we see that these two things were actually quite similar. The people who occupy the location of the landowner are allowed by social convention to exclude others from the land and their power to do so is enforced by socially created norms and institutions. The families of the artisans, laborers, or officers who hold their positions in the village as a *watan* were likewise allowed by social convention to exclude others from competition in their trades. In their ability to exclude others from utilizing a source of livelihood, the land-controlling *mirasdar* and the job-controlling *watandar* were in nearly identical positions. This similarity underscores that a landowner does not occupy land *per se* but rather a tract of social space, a *location* that comes with obligations and burdens but also, critically, with a livelihood. Under the relations I'm describing here, owning land and having a job were nearly identical social positions.

Zooming out from the village for a moment, we see that higher office holders within the Mughal administration also held their positions as proprietary livelihoods. This remained true despite the Mughals' attempts to modernize their administrative structure. According to John F. Richards, the Mughals were very consciously trying to transform their administrative system from feudalistic tribute and hierarchical mediation to direct relations with the peasants (Richards 1993, 87). Such a relationship would have implied that the administrative officials would have lost their customary, multifaceted, loyalty-driven powers and privileges and been reduced to

bureaucratic functionaries who served only at the pleasure of the emperor. The Mughals, however, never quite managed to implement the drastic societal changes that would have been needed (ibid.).

As with any agricultural empire, their primary aim was to capture the surplus produce from the work of the peasants and artisans. The existing Hindu and Muslim landed power magnates were, of course, the gatekeepers of this produce. The Mughals initially tried to bring these feudal leaders into their administration by declaring their existing holdings to be grants from the emperor. Some of these magnates-turned-grantees became known as *chaudhuris* or *deshmukhs*, two titles for the top authorities of the small but very important administrative areas known as *parganas.* Included in their "grants" was a portion of the collected revenue, some tax-free land of their own, the right to certain ceremonial (but still valuable) gifts and many other perquisites (Kulkarni 1967, 31). In exchange for these benefits were many obligations, including revenue collection, peace keeping, ceremonial appearances, and many other duties. Importantly, their positions remained heritable, although a substantial fee was charged when it changed hands:

> Each recipient of a grant executed a written bond (muchalka) as a guarantee of
> good performance and paid a fee (pishkash) of six and one-half years' allowances
> on the revenue in installments to secure this appointment. At the death of a
> *chaudhuri* his son and heir normally obtained a new patent of office from the
> ruler. The state could, however, depose a pargana headman at any time and
> replace him with a more satisfactory candidate - usually another kinsman from
> the dominant lineage and caste in the subdistrict (Richards 1993, 81).

Like the residents of the village, these *pargana*-level officers held their positions as *watans* (Roy 1993, 375). So, like the village headman and his village, the *pargana* headman certainly did not perform the administrative and peace-keeping work of the *pargana* as a "job" in the bourgeois/capitalist sense of that term and did not even perform it as a mere servant-at-will of the

emperor. Rather, the right to earn the privileged livelihood of *chaudhuris* or *deshmukhs* belonged to certain families and the broader kin networks of which they were parts. It was, in short, a *watan,*   Their right to this livelihood was dependent on the family members' performance of the many obligations that came with the position, but, should they fail to perform, the Mughal government could not transfer the right willy-nilly to anyone it chose; if it was not being bequeathed to progeny, it was expected to be given to some more distant member of the kin network. Conversely, even though a family in good standing could count on their right as an inter-generational asset, its members had to pay a very substantial fee for the transfer, almost as if they were purchasing it anew. This practice obviously provided a source of rent for the superiors in the Mughal governing apparatus and a source of revenue for the empire as a whole, but it also undoubtedly demonstrated their concurrent claim on the asset. According to Richards, this early arrangement of bringing the old power-magnates into the system was still essentially a model of miniature kingdoms paying tribute to an empire (Richards 1993, 87).

Even after Todar Mal's reforms of the 1560s, the Mughals were still ununable to reduce the claimants on the assets to just two (the imperial government and the purported owner). Even though the old power magnates lost their broad powers and faced increased intervention from above (in particular, to increase production), and even though many more Empire-appointed officials came on the scene, many still enjoyed feudal powers over parts of the territory they governed. And most offices were in practice heritable even if superiors had to approve their transfer (Richards 1993, 60, 66). This was not only true of *pargana*-level *deshmukhs* and *chaudhuris* but also other officers such as the *desai, qanungo* and *mansabdar* (see: Grover 2010, 102, 109). Meanwhile, *zamindars*, landholders who were sometimes themselves directly

revenue officers and sometimes holders of other offices, also had their customary powers reduced but still retained many of their old rights. As Richards writes, "[t]hese zamindari rights became a form of private property, which, when ratified by the state, could be passed on to heirs and alienated to others" (Richards 1993, 88). So, we see that the Mughal administrative system, despite its attempts to modernize, was still based on a proprietary livelihood model – the livelihood itself was an asset that could be owned even though the ownership of it came in a multi-layered form. To have completely rationalized and modernized their bureaucratic system, the Mughals would have had to eliminate the proprietary livelihood model of motivating their administrators. To do that, they would have had to have enacted drastic changes (Richards 1993, 87) that would essentially have affected a top-to-bottom bourgeois revolution, a revolution in which administrative positions are wage-paying jobs and the only things that can be owned are inanimate objects. Such a revolution would have, in turn, destroyed their fundamentally rent-driven form of power. In many cases their jobs were referred to as as *watans,* and like the village-level *watandars* described above, they "owned" a tract of social space, a social location that came with both benefits and obligations.

Proprietary Livelihood and Labor Intermediaries in the Early Twentieth Century

The historical examples that I have been reviewing affirm that various forms of proprietary livelihood have a long history in India. The fact that Delhi's twenty-first century sanitation workers practiced their own versions of proprietary livelihood should thus come as no surprise. That being said, I think it is worth discussing another, less perfect example of proprietary livelihood, that of labor intermediation. Many Indian workers to this day find themselves in

work crews that are controlled by various types of labor intermediaries, and so labor

intermediation has an importance that extends well beyond sanitation workers. In relations of

labor intermediation, livelihoods (the things we would otherwise call "jobs") also exist within

socially embedded networks that involve reciprocity, reputation, obligation and the like. While

the livelihoods within these relations cannot be said to be proprietary, they are heavily controlled

and managed by the labor intermediaries and are thus also very different from "jobs" in the

capitalist sense. The relevance of this example will become clear as it is described.

Labor intermediaries played a vitally important part in both labor relations and work

culture in the subcontinent from at least the days of the East India Company. Usually embedded

in caste, religiousous, and neighborhood relationships and often also mixed up with low-level

organized crime, such intermediaries probably did not pre-exist colonialism (at least not in the

form I'll be describing here) because their function was to mediate between the needs of modern

enterprises and the dense social networks of relationships that were both more complex than and

far different from the liberal ideal of a competitive labor market. Broadly referred to as

"jobbers" by the late colonial administration (Royal Commission on Labour in India 1931), these

intermediaries had many different names in different Indian languages, such as *sardar,*

mukkadam, *maistry, thekadar* and *jamadar.* According to a 1931 report by the Royal

Commission on Labour in India (also known as the "Whitley Commission"), such a figure was

"almost ubiquitous in the Indian Factory System and usually combines in one person a

formidable series of functions" (ibid., 23). The Whitley Commission observed that jobbers were

responsible for hiring, firing, training, disciplining, *and* representing the interests of the workers;

the commission thus believed that they combined the roles of a supervisor, a human resources

officer, and a union representative. What I hope to show here is that the practices surrounding

labor intermediaries demonstrate the existence of a tendency to treat livelihood opportunities as a

tract of social territory, a form of property to which access is controlled.

The Whitley Commission's description of a jobber's role demonstrated an awareness that

these figures had much more complex relationships with their workers than the categories of

formal employment could accurately represent:

> [The jobber] is primarily a chargeman. Promoted from the ranks after full
> experience of the factory, he is responsible for the supervision of labour while at
> work. In a large factory, there may be a hierarchy of jobbers for this purpose,
> including women overseers in departments staffed by women. He has also, on
> many occasions, to act as assistant mechanic, and to help in keeping the machines
> in running order.   So far as the worker is given technical training, the jobber is
> expected to provide it. He is not, however, merely responsible for the worker
> once he has obtained work; the worker has generally to approach him to secure a
> job, and is nearly always dependent on him for the security of that job as well as
> for a transfer to a better one. Many jobbers follow the worker even further than
> the factory gate; they may finance him when he is in debt and he may even be
> dependent on them for his housing (Royal Commission on Labor 1931, 23).

The authors of the report go on to passionately decry the allegedly common practice of workers

paying bribes and gratuities to the jobbers in order to attain and retain work. Much like Delhi's

safai karamcharis in the early twenty-first century, the workers studied by the commission had to

buy their way into employment (M. R. Cohen 1982, 134ff; Morris 1965). Any situation in which

workers pay anything beyond a finder's fee to get work raises questions about the nature of the

labor market. Why would either the worker or the employer tolerate a middle man? Why

wouldn't the market simply allow both parties parties to find an agreeable wage?

Paying bribes and gratuities to an intermediary in the contemporary formal sector of India

is hardly surprising. In the context of modern-day government employment, the wages and

benefits offered by even the lowest government position are usually considerably higher than what unskilled workers would otherwise be able to garner. The wage rates are, moreover, set by government policy and the job is thought to be extremely extremely secure once obtained. In the private sector, on the other hand, labor intermediaries can help employers get around the numerous regulations to which formal employers are subject.

The economic incentives behind labor intermediaries are far less clear in late colonial Bombay, a time and place about which much labor history has been written. The Whitley Commission reported that the labor market at most established Indian factories remained in the workers' favor until the mid-twenties (RCL 1931 pp. 21-2). While Morris David Morris argued in 1965 that the labor supply for the Bombay textile mills in the colonial era was far less limited than either the Whitley Commission or the mill owners themselves suggested, even he provides evidence showing only that the labor supply was no more than "quantitatively adequate for all mill needs" (Morris 1965, p.58). He does not show that there was either an oversupply of labor or a downward pressure on wages. Although there was a growing body of labor-oriented law in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the labor legislation of colonial India, especially before the first world war, was haphazard, narrow, and weakly enforced (Anderson 1993, 118). If these observations are correct, the jobber and similar characters apparently did not *require* either either an oversupply of labor or an environment of an environment of strong regulation to thrive.

Why then were rent-seeking gatekeepers like jobbers tolerated for so long? Let us begin the answer to this question by focusing on Bombay's textile mills. As Morris argues, the Bombay textile mills actually seemed to have preferred working with the jobbers. The

government and social reformers had in fact made several attempts to eliminate them, but the employers systematically resisted and skirted such efforts (Morris 1965, p.150-2). The jobber did offer some practical advantages to mill owners, such as language skills, general cultural knowledge of the workers' milieu, and on-the-job experience. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the mill owners' preference for jobbers came from satisfaction with their managerial abilities. Quite the contrary, the mill owners regularly expressed discontent with the retention rate, attendance, and skill level of their workers and also often complained that the jobbers were responsible for small strikes and other disturbances in the mills' operation (Morris 1965, p.148). The Whitley Commission stated that whatever practical advantages that the jobber did offer could be better fulfilled by a professional group of trained labor officers, who would be regarded by the workers as "their friend" and would thus improve the welfare of the workers while also putting hiring and firing back in direct control of mill management (Royal Commission on Labour 1931, p. 24-5).

The mill owners appeared to have preferred the jobbers for two reasons. The first is that the mill owners showed a reluctance to make any sort of capital investments, even in machinery that had already proved its efficiency elsewhere (Morris 1965, p. 62). Given such an aversion to risk, an expenditure on administrative reorganization and new human resource managers whose effectiveness in Indian conditions was unproven would probably have seemed risky to a Bombay mill owner (ibid., p. 131). The second reason is that the mill owners probably found the jobbers easier to control than a well-organized work force (Chandavarkar 1994, 297). Although the jobbers were frequently seen to be responsible for a lot of insubordination at the mills and shared the blame for absenteeism and turnover, replacing them with a team of labor

officers would have entailed a more direct but also more bureaucratized relationship to the workers and this might have created favorable conditions for unionization. Indeed, unions were forming in early twentieth century Bombay, and they were responsible for some of the more successful strikes. But their relatively limited success was due largely to the presence of the jobbers (Morris 1965, 146), conversely, increased labor militancy curtailed the power of the jobbers (Chandavarkar 2007, 200) This is not to say that there were not power struggles between mill management and jobbers – such struggles were apparently common – but a jobber who became too demanding could be replaced with a new jobber who brought with him his own set of workers (ibid, p.197). Discontented jobbers organized strikes on occasion and in later years they were even known to have some influence within the unions (Royal Commission on Labour in India, 1931, p.25). However, the jobbers themselves were not organized and so, more often than not, the mills could use divide-and-conquer strategies to get the upper hand. From the mill owners' perspective, then, having a labor intermediary, a rent-seeking gatekeeper to mill employment, was a felicitous arrangement – at least in the short term.

The fact that the mills actually seemed to prefer working with jobbers, does not however, provide a full explanation for their rise and persistence in an age of relatively scarce labor. Given that the workers were exploited by the jobbers in so many ways, including the payment of "commission" to get and keep jobs, would they not have had a strong incentive to dispense with the jobber altogether? Would not the workers and the unions have enthusiastically embraced the government's attempts to break the strangle hold of the jobbers? A simple assessment based on the supply and demand of labor would suggest an affirmative answer; it would be foolish to subject oneself to a rent-seeking intermediary if one has a relatively good bargaining position in

the labor market. The evidence, however, suggests that the incentive structure was more complex than this. Morris cites several pieces of evidence that jobbers were able to rally their client workers into strikes (Morris 1965, p. 145-47). And one of the more surprising findings of the Whitley Commission was that the workers themselves were resisting management's attempt to create labor officers. This fact left the commission to conclude that there was "no doubt that the jobbers were responsible for the workers' opposition; and no doubt in many cases it will be extremely difficult to defeat the jobbers' machinations (RCL 1931, p.25)." Why would workers side with the jobbers against a program designed to end their exploitation?

Clearly this could only happen if the relationship between jobbers and workers went well beyond that of simply charging a commission for finding jobs for workers for workers. Morris found that the relationship was indeed quite deep and complex:

> The jobber's hold on his subordinates was reinforced by his social connections with them. The method of recruitment usually permitted him to hire workers, not infrequently his relations or caste brethren, who came from the same village or district. But the ultimate hold, making possible the jobber's resistance to considerable pressure from the employer, was that the mill-hand loyalties necessarily tended to be identified with the jobber rather than the employer. The jobber gave him his position and the jobber could take it away or at least make life miserable for him. Moreover, if the jobber was sacked a new jobber could well sweep a department clean of its old hands and replace them with his clients. Unprotected against arbitrary treatment, the mill hand had no alternative but to support the devil he knew against the devil he did not know. Here we have an explanation of cases of operatives striking in support of a discharged jobber or following him to another mill (Morris 1965, p.145).

For the workers then, jobbers were more than just commission agents or middlemen, they were deeply embedded members of their community. Given that jobbers tended to be connected to their workers by relationships of kinship, caste, and locality, we can fairly safely say that they had the power to diminish the workers' social status within their

community, an act that would affect not just individual workers but whole families. It must be pointed out that such relationships, however unequal, are double sided; workers could undoubtedly cast aspersions on jobbers too if they exceeded the boundaries of their customary authority. Much the same can be said of the debtor relationship; if the worker is perpetually in debt to the jobber, the jobber has at least some interest in the well-being and employment status of the worker.

Moreover, the Indian laborer in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries would have had good reason to mistrust even the most modern of employers. Among the few laws that governed employer-employee relationships were contract laws that criminalized many forms of worker resistance, including, often, just working slowly (Anderson 1993, 110-12). Workers found in breach could be subject to penal contracts, which effectively bonded them to their employers and thus blurred the distinction between contractual and coerced labor (ibid.). As exploitative as jobbers were of their workers, they had a devil-you-know advantage over other possible employer-employee agents.employer-employee agents.

Morris notes that, to the extent that caste played a role in the Bombay mills, it had very little to with the traditional craft-oriented, *jati* dimension of the institution (ii.e., regional, endogamous, task-connected task-connected groups), especially in the twentieth century. He even argues that the discrimination between clean and unclean castes, though certainly practiced in the mills, was less strict than many observers contended (Morris 1965, pp. 76-82). Morris argues that exclusive social identities among the unskilled and less skilled workers were primarily rooted in the "tendency for groups to preempt for

themselves the monopoly of whatever jobs were available (Morris 1965, p. 83)." So, although caste was not necessarily the prime parameter for exclusion, workers were, apparently, forming exclusive groups so that they could maintain the power to exclude others from certain jobs and thereby guarantee themselves a steady source of income. While Morris attributed this mainly to a shortage of employment opportunities, this attribution attribution seems to contradict his own evidence that the labor supply did not greatly exceed demand. If supply and demand of labor was not the major factor, then it is clear that some very socially complex forces were at work. In either case, it appears that many labor intermediaries made themselves the center of an exclusive or factional community with whom they had variegated and complex ties, the most important of which was thehe capture sources of livelihood and the the treatment ofment of them as one's own social territory or property.

More contemporary evidence about the practices surrounding labor intermediaries comes from Adam Sargent's 2013 ethnographic observations of Delhi-area construction sites. Sargent reports that labor intermediaries, called *thekedars* in his field sites, dominated the supply of labor of labor to construction companies. His research shows that the *thekadari* system has not changed much since the early twentieth century, and his research also reaffirms that the *thekadar* was more than just an employment agent. The *thekadar* tended to employ a relatively steady crew of workers over fairly long periods of time. Instead of simply sending the workers to the construction companies, as an employment agency would do, the *thekadar* charged the companies piece rates for the tasks that the latter needed while he organized and payed his crew. The *thekedar* would

provide advances to the worker's families, which were usually necessary to get them to leave their homes for construction sites, and he would provide them short-term loans, which could also be necessary to solve domestic problems that might pull the worker away from his job.

The *thekedari* system essentially existed as a solution to the problems of trust and reliability. Extreme poverty meant that people needed advances and loans to in order to serve as effective workers, but this fact, in turn, meant that someone had to make sure that the workers did not simply run off with the money. The *thekedar* recruited his crew of workers from people with whom he had some kind of social connection: kin-based, caste-based, region-based, etc. These connections allowed him to shame the problematic workers, and such attacks on a person's reputation could hurt not only the individual themselves but also their family members as they sought employment, marriages, credit, etc. Poverty also meant that various factors (transportation problems, domestic problems, etc.) could cause workers to be absent or disappear from jobs altogether. The *thekedar* again managed this by advancing the workers' money, getting them on-site tents, helping them with medical issues and, perhaps most importantly, maintaining a crew that was large enough to provide coverage for absent workers. Because it's hard to find workers that are reliably certified for the more skilled jobs, the *thekedar* also provided assurance of appropriate abilities (Sargent, n.d., 39–69).

If Sargent's description of the *thekedari* system shows how workers were not employees of the constructions companies, it also shows how the workers were more than just employees of the *thedekar*. They were all connected to the *thekedar* through social ties, and the *thekedar* could use those ties to control the worker. Conversely the workers

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could use those same connections to reign in abuses by the *thekedar.* The *thekedar's* crew described the relationship between themselves and the *thekedar* in familial terms – the *thekedar* was a father figure who cared for his "children (ibid, 72)." Aside from the advances and the loans, if there was not enough work for the entire crew, the *thekadar* would try distribute the work fairly among his men, all the while making sure that each of the crew members got enough money for daily necessities (*kharcha)*. The final weekly payments were also regularly adjusted on the basis of need (ibid, 73). The crew members, for their part, reciprocated with their steady work and cooperation. The communual or familial nature of this arrangement is underscored by the fact that they framed their group in inside/outside terms; men from outside the crew or its broader network were seen as untrustworthy (ibid, 67). In Sargent's words, all of "[t]hese acts simultaneously bind the worker to the *thekedar* but also provide a certain amount of support for the worker" (ibid, 73).

There is nothing romantic about this relationship, and Sargent makes clear that the workers were not naive about their subordinate subordinate status. Despite the many hassles that came from a being a a *thekedar,* the latter were clearly better off than their workers. He recounts discussions between workers about whether or not the *thekedar* really cared for them as he was supposed to to and whether or not he was treating each one of them as a man (*aadmi)* or as a bonded laborer (*banda)* (ibid, 76). The interlocutors did not come to any resolutions but they did compare their situation favorably to that of U.S. workers who had to face the labor market alone (ibid, 75). Sargent's ethnographic descriptions demonstrate that the workers saw their situation as

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the sort of double-bondage that I described in Chapter 1: they were bonded to a source of livelihood and to a supportive community that eased the difficulties of expropriated freedom, but they were also bonded to the constraints, frustrations and mistreatment that came with membership in such a community.

I am postulating, in short, that jobbers, *jamadars, thekedars* and other labor intermediaries made themselves the centers of small factional communities of workers, communities *to which* they had obligations and *from which* they gained financial wealth, social status, and a small degree of violent power. Within these factional communities, a job was not just "a job" in the modern sense of and opportunity for selling labor time. Rather, the workers owned positions in the intermediaryy's network, and those positions included a livelihood. It was the jobber's responsibility to get his whole crew installed in a mill while his workers remained bonded to him. The Whitley commission believed that figures like Bombay's jobbers were common in industries across colonial India. Evidence suggests that Kolkata's (Kolkata's (Calcutta's) jute industry had its equivalent of jobbers and that they too had enduring relationships with the workers they exploited. The evidence from Kolkata also suggests that jobbers and workers together formed factional groups that excluded others from work, including women (Sen 1999, p. 126-7).

I am not arguing that the practices of labor intermediation form a perfect example of proprietary livelihood. What I have tried to show is that, in their control of access to jobs and in their elaborate systems of advancements, lending, redistribution and reciprocity, the labor intermediaries do not simply funnel employees to employers, they control the livelihoods of their crew members. What this suggests is that labor

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intermediation treats jobs (i.e., possibilities for material sustenance) as objects of control

and thus thus that thisthis practice, like proprietary livelihood, is very much at odds with

bourgeois/capitalist ideals of what a labor market should be.

A Few Examples from Medieval and Early Modern Europe:

Office Buying in France's Old Regime

Some very useful examples of proprietary livelihood come from the various practices of rent

earning that existed in pre-revolutionary France, especially those concerning the sale and

purchase of administrative offices. The practice of buying administrative offices in the Old

Regime is well known among social scientists but the property relationships involved in these

transactions are much less well known. The fees paid to acquire these offices were not bribes,

they were legally recognized payments that granted someone the exclusive privilege of

exercising the powers associated with the office. These powers usually included the levying of

some sort of fee but, according to George Taylor, the primary value of the offices came from the

extraneous opportunities and status they gave the holder (Taylor 1967, 478). As long as one

paid the annual fee, or *paulette,* the exclusive privilege was transferable through sale, rental and

bequest (ibid., 477). Though the exclusive privilege was often treated as ownership of the office

itself, the crown was in the fact the ultimate proprietor because it retained the ability repurchase

the office at any time (Giesey 1977, 283). According to Ralph Giesey, the holders of these

offices were better seen as usufructors than an owners (ibid.). So then, under this set of relations,

the king owned the office but sold both the benefits and responsibilities of its use to other people.

Indeed, the historian George V. Taylor used the term "proprietary wealth" to describe these forms of non-capitalist wealth prevalent within the Old Regime. Taylor wrote, "[t]here was in the economy of the Old Regime a distinct configuration of wealth, noncapitalist in function, that may be called 'proprietary.' It embodied investments in land, urban property, venal office, and annuities (Taylor 1967, 471)." Taylor argues that the word "proprietary" does a better job describing the relationships in question than a term like "feudal" or "seigneurial" because it applies to a larger array of revenue sources than just land.

He writes: "'proprietary' describes these fortunes not only because it is derived from 'property' but also because it echoes the Old Regime term *propriétaire*, a prestige marker claimed by those who owned land, even in trifling amounts (ibid., 473)." And Taylor notes that the ownership of offices was considered particularly favorable: "[i]n the proprietary scale of preference, the passion for property in office was nearly as strong as that for property in land. A venal office was a long-term investment. Usually it brought a low but stable return, and, as long as the owner regularly paid the *droit annuel* (in earlier times, the *paulette*), he could, under restrictions applicable to each office, sell it to a buyer, bequeath it to an heir, or even rent it out to someone . . . (Taylor 1967, 477)." Because these rights were transferable and heritable they were seen as multi-generational sources of wealth (Doyle 1984, 834). As in my observation of Delhi's garbage collectors, Taylor finds that within these relationships, "[r]ent, in fact, was at the center of all calculations (Taylor 1967, 474)" and that such arrangements were attractive because they could support a family indefinitely (Taylor 1967, 473). He also finds that they were not limited to the wealthy and powerful but that "[t]here were shopkeepers, artisans and even peasants who invested in *rentes* [annuities] that gave them small incomes for old age (Taylor 1967, 473-4)."

So it seems that in the Old Regime, offices big and small were held as property and that such property was valuable because it provided some form of livelihood, direct or indirect.

These practices seem to indicate that the people of pre-revolutionary France saw little distinction between the rent generated by the physical properties of land and that generated by purely social arrangements (or, as I think of them, ""social locations"). The *ancien regime* sold offices as a regular and legitimate method of raising revenue for the crown while the latter sold these revenue-generating positions to everyone from high military officers to judges to wigmakers (Doyle 1984, 834). Many of the offices were directly profitable by virtue of the high levies thatthat the holder was authorized to collect, while others were more valuable for the titles and prestige that accompanied them (ibid.). They were also secure (or appeared so) because they were "venal monopolies (ibid., 833)," sources of revenue protected by the state.

I prefer my term, "proprietary livelihood" to Taylor's Taylor's "proprietary wealth" because the latter fails to describe anything specific. An owned gold coin is wealth and is proprietary but it shares none of the relevant characteristics of the phenomena in question.

Medieval English Villeinage

A highly illustrative if perhaps extreme example of proprietary livelihood is the institution of serfdom or villeinage as found in medieval England. During the Middle Ages, peasants of this region, as in much of western Europe, were formally divided into the two broad classes, freemen and villeins (or "serfs") (Goldberg 2004, 89). Although the practical distinction between the two was blurry at best (Britton 1977, 69; Gies and Gies 1990, 167), a villein was a peasant who was

formally bonded to the lord of the manor and thus faced more onerous restrictions and obligations than the free peasant.

The status of villeins with regard to their land was very different from that of either renters or landowners in a modern context. Like free peasants, villeins were tenants upon the land and not the owners of it. The land of all peasants was ". . . held by various lords, whether great magnates, ecclesiastics or mere lords of the manor (Goldberg 2004, 89)." As tenants, they had exclusive rights to use and reside upon designated tracts of land in exchange for various cash and in-kind fees, including labor services on the lord's demesne (Keen 1990, 54). Yet villeins were not simply paying a rent in the modern sense and in some important ways their tenancy resembled what we would otherwise think of as ownership. It included, for example, the rights to sublet and sell their land (ibid., 91). It was also heritable, meaning that the tenancy was transferred to heirs according to the customary laws of the area (Goldberg 2004, 91) and, moreover, that it was a multi-generational asset. However, even though villeins could transfer their land, when they did so, they were technically releasing it back to the lord who then granted it to the new occupant, charging a fee in the process (ibid., 90). The lord or his representative thus had authority to deny the sale, which did not happen very frequently but could be done for political reasons (Dyer 2002, 110). So, a villein had far more rights over the land they used and occupied than would be implied by the modern sense of "renter," but, at the same time, they did not have the ultimate power to determine the final disposition of the land, a power that we would otherwise associate with ownership.

I am in no way trying to imply that villeins were somewhere *between* renters and owners. My point is that they were involved in sets of social relationships that do not fit into modern

liberal or capitalist notions of either renting or owning. Key to understanding this difference is to understand that despite their bondage, villeins were better off than the strangers and vagabonds who lurked in the the sort of "bare life" condition on the peripheries of the village. Unlike other peasants, these people frequently were *mere renters* (Gies and Gies, 80). Even though some of them, such as day laborers and itinerant craftsmen, may have provided valuable services (ibid.), they were still not welcomed and those who housed them were often punished for harming and terrorizing the village (ibid.). Despite their many hardships, villeins were neverthelessnevertheless full members of the village and manorial communities.

It is in light of this membership that their status must be understood. As mentioned, their tenancy had many features of ownership, but they could not be considered owners and, although they paid to make use of land, their obligations to the lord went far beyond anything we would currently call a rent. Most notably, villeins could only leave the manor with permission and payment of a fine (Gies and Gies 1990, 76). Becoming a villein also put one under the jurisdiction of manorial courts (Goldberg 2004, 89). Villeinage also frequently required one's appearance at the court as, for example, a pledge or a chief pledge in the tithing or frankpledge system (Dyer 1994, 3; Gies and Gies 1990, 179). Another requirement of villeins was that they were obligated to participate in the election of local village officers as well as to serve in such offices, not all of which were equally desirable (Dyer 1994, 3). A villein was also obligated to accept various other constraints; marriage, for example, required the lord's consent (Goldberg 2004, 251). Patronage of the lord's monopolistic mills and bakeries was also a requirement, the violation of which could be harshly punished (Keen 1990, 54). Villeins rarely had freedom to choose what crops to plant because, especially in the open field system, planting was a collective

choice of the community, often enforced by the manorial court (Gies and Gies 1990, 132). Yet,

despite all these oppressive conditions, the villeins held heritable and transferable customary

rights to a tract of land (Goldberg 2004, 91) from which they could generate their own

subsistence and sometimes a considerable surplus (Gies and Gies 1990, 74). Certain other rights

also came with their villeinage status, such as the use of common pastures, access to woodlands

(Dyer 2002, 162) and the opportunity to serve in powerful village positions like that of juror in

the manorial court. The villein was not, then, simply paying rents for the use of land. Indeed,

they were not in in relationships that can be reduced to mere transactions. Rather, the villeins

held membership in a community, and with this membership came many rules and obligations

but also opportunities for subsistence. Both their rights and their obligations were governed by

customary laws as enforced by the courts of the manor and the "hundreds" (Gies and Gies 1990,

183).

I choose to describe the relationships involved in villeinage as "proprietary livelihood"

because, as I have tried to show in the previous paragraphs, a source of livelihood (usage of

agricultural land, access to the commons, etc.) is the central component of that set of

relationships. Central though it is, the livelihood is by no means the only component of

villeinage relations; the other aspects of villeinage cannot be separated from it; each component

is inextricably linked to the others. In the case of villeinage, the ownership of the livelihood was

split between the villein who held practical ownership on a decade-to-decade basis and the lord

who held ultimate control of it. In reality, no one had very much control of the land because its

usage and transfers were so heavily dictated by customary law. The land, it can be said, was not

really the thing that was owned or transferred; it was, rather part of the total package of benefits and obligations that came with the social position of villeinage.

The social positions held by villeins were a valuable thing and hence even partial ownership of it (i.e., control of access to it) was worthwhile. The social position of the villeins was valuable because it provided families shelter from the precarious anonymity of strangerhood. The itinerant laborers and craftsmen who lived on the margins of the village faced economic competition and irregular work engagements. Moreover, they were easily abused and murdered (Gies and Gies 1990, 80). However difficult life as a villein might have been, it provided an opportunity for generating subsistence and surplus wealth, an opportunity that was protected from competition and violent destruction by others. Because of these advantages, the position of a villein, despite its oppressive conditions, would have been desirable and thus its control would have been a source of power. The lords, of course, were the primary holders of such power but, in order to maintain their control, they had to compromise with the peasantry, enlist their help (Dyer 1994, 3), abide by customary law, and, in the process, hand over partial control to the villagers as well as to the individual villeins themselves. Regardless of who had what level of control, these valuable social positions within villages and manors were non-physical objects whose control was worthy of the expenditure of power resources.

If my interpretation of the secondary literature is valid, then the world of the peasantry (or at least a large part of it) was broken up into tracts of valuable social space. These tracts of social space were remarkably similar to the tracts of physical space upon which they depended. Like land, they were non-reproducible and also rivalrous, meaning that one could not simply make more of them to meet demand and one family's usage of one of them diminished or

precluded another's. Indeed, one could go so far as to say that property in physical space and property in social space were one and the same.

The agricultural workers were not the only ones who had their social space divided in this way. Indeed, a very great part of village society was divided into such tracts. The position of miller, for example, seems to have been similar in that a tenant could occupy the job of village miller, which granted the family a portion of the grist as well some land for gardening in exchange for grist revenues paid to the lord (Dyer 2002, 196). The very important position of juror in the manorial courts was also heritable. Edward Britton has shown that the institution of the jury in an English medieval manorial court was a very different position from that of its modern namesake. Instead of being selected for a particular case because of their *disconnection* from the litigants or the accused, members of juries were permanent and selected because they knew the people involved and because their local knowledge gave them special insight. "Juror" was essentially a permanent position held by people with wealth and prestige within the village. Because jurors had the power to rule on issues such as taxation and land sales, the job came with considerable economic benefits. Like that of villein, the position of juror was heritable and could also be bought and sold; hence, it, it represents another type of proprietary livelihood (Britton 1977, 44). In contrast to the villein, land ownership was not central to the position of juror and yet, being a transferable, rent-generating asset, it functioned much like land – further indicating that the distinction between owning land and owning a social location was hardly meaningful. The land was merely part of the wealth bundle that came with the position of villein, just as other bundles came with other positions. What mattered was that one occupied or owned a place in society and that this place came with with sources of livelihood.

Similarly, numerous trades also held proprietary rights over their livelihoods, both collectively and individually. As E.P. Thompson notes, the only practical way to learn a craft in medieval and early modern worlds was to practice it alongside experienced masters of the trade in their workshops and, so, to those unable to obtain an apprenticeship with an experienced master, the craft was an enigmatic secret. "The artisans regarded this 'mystery' as their *property,* and asserted their unquestionable right to the quiet and exclusive use and enjoyment of their . . . arts and trades (Thompson 1966, 253)." The acquisition of this collective monopoly status was key to the formation of early guilds in Europe; such status was *granted* upon petition by local Bishops, feudatories, or town governments, meaning that, at least in theory, the status could be taken away again. The powers-that-be also charged regular fees for granting the artisans their monopoly status (Epstein 1991, 53–58).

Moreover, a key function of the guilds was to regulate competition between existing members and to control entry of new members (ibid., 107-15). Journeymen and daily wage earners who had been admitted to the guilds as apprentices had great trouble becoming masters because the guilds limited the number of masters in any given area in order to manage competition (Karras 2003, 136–37). Importantly, however, guilds did not charge "entry fees" to the kin of existing members and a son could inherit a father's master-ship (Gassen 2016, 60; Epstein 1991). Widows could not usually permanently take over their husbands' position but, if they had a son, they could remain in the position until the son came of age. If there was no heir, they were allowed to serve for just one year (Ojala 2016, 140). It was fairly common for widows to marry journeymen, thus allowing both parties to retain the advantages of a master's position. If there was no man to take over the position, the other masters decided its fate (ibid., 147). The

masters, of course, had responsibilities to serve the guild and abide by its rules and quality standards. All of this is to say that, like the world of the peasantry, the world of artisans was divided into tracts of social space that were held like property. Once attained, these tracts protected their holders from competition while also securing their location in a community.

And this was not limited to highly skilled artisans. As Haim Burstin observed, unskilled laborers in Old Regime Paris had arrangements that were very similar to those of the guilds, although their rights were based on informal custom rather than the formal agreements and charters of the guilds. Different unskilled tasks were monopolized by those workers who already had a history of performing them, and they began to see themselves and their family as having a right to do these jobs and a right to exclude others from them. Burstin argues that "these rights assumed the status of property. Even the water-carriers, upon retiring from their occupation, would sell their business to a comrade (Burstin, 1993, 71)." So, even for unskilled workers, their social space was divided into proprietary tracts that provided a livelihood. The evidence seems to suggest that that the class of relations that I am calling proprietary livelihood was apparently extremely common in medieval and early modern Europe.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show that the general type of ownership that I found among the sanitation workers of Delhi, the one I am calling "proprietary livelihood," has historical precedent not only on the Indian subcontinent but on the European one as well. To reiterate a point that I have made repeatedly in this dissertation, I am not claiming to have discovered anything new. What I hope to provide is a new category that allows us to see some useful

similarities between some of these well documented historical phenomena and the observations of Balmiki social life that I made in early twenty-first century Delhi.

The phenomena in question are undoubtedly a form of ownership in so far as they allow the owners to exclude others from the use of some object and allow them to transfer the property to others through sale, bequest, or rental. This form of property is, however, an anathema to bourgeois-capitalist relations in so far as it is anti-market and also also in so far as it prevents labor itself from becoming a commodity. For these same reasons, under these relations, there is scarcely the possibility of thinking that a piece of property is a physical thing. As I pointed out, there was hardly a distinction between the ownership of land and the ownership of a monopolistic right to exchange with a group of people. In neither case was the right absolute (in Macpherson's sense); the property had multiple claimants such that it could not be used for just any purpose nor be transferred to just anyone at any time. Rather than giving an individual absolute control over a physical thing, proprietary livelihood gave a family a social *location* in Hannah Arendt's sense of the term (1998, 62–70). This location, at the very least, kept the family fed and sustained in practicalpractical perpetuity. But the position did much more than this; it involved the family in enduring face-to-face relationships with others, it embraced them in customary law, and protected them from the bare-life existence of the wastelands between villages – the interstitial spaces that would have most likely destroyed their existence as a family. For those in the upper levels of the hierarchy, an owned livelihood could bring great wealth, power, and prestige. In all cases, the social location obliged its owner to fulfill very significant obligations, obligations that could include anything from cleaning out dry-latrines to governing hundreds of villages.

A further implication of my argument about proprietary livelihood is that the traditional Marxist view of expropriation needs to be subtly expanded or re-framed. The expropriation that Marx describes in Chapter 27 of the first volume of *Capital* is a story of peasants being driven from the land by a combination of changing economic circumstances, enclosures of common lands, and sheer violence. Marx's overall point is (famously!) that the cultivators lost their access to the means of production and were thus forced to sell their labor on the open market.

My analysis of the secondary literature in this chapter shows that even those who did not have direct access to the means of production, people like village service providers, urban guild members and even some aristocratic bureaucrats, nevertheless had enduring guarantees of a source of subsistence. This source of subsistence was inseparable from equally enduring and binding obligations to perform some kind of work. What these people possessed is thus best understood as a social position that involves both duties and rewards. My concept of proprietary livelihood is designed to describe such social positions. My contention is similar to Arendt's argument that property in the pre-modern world was valuable exactly because it provided a social location (Arendt 2018, 61) but, whereas she is still placing the emphasis on land ownership, I am trying to show here that the property does not necessarily need to involve land at all. Multiple sources of livelihood can form the location and this fact only underscores the social-ness of the location.

So, aside from its descriptive value, the term "proprietary livelihood" has the benefit of allowing us to see that the distinction between cultivators and service providers is actually very small, small because the cultivator did not own the land in a bourgeois-capitalist sense but instead had a partial property right to the social position that comes with being a *villein,*

watandar, mirasdar, etc. In this way, they were not so different from the village barber, cobbler, or even the juror or chief. And, indeed, they were not even all that different from an office holder in either eighteenth century India or France.

This implies that my analysis gives us even more reason to think that Arendt's understanding of expropriation can help us add layers of complexity to Marx's original formulation. For Arendt, expropriation is much more than the process of breaking people away from the means of production; it is the process of severing them from their social locations. Expropriation denies people the capacity to participate in the establishment of the "common world (Arendt 2018, 117)" – the world of objects that are physically and phenomenologically constructed through the "'web' of human of relationships (ibid., 183)." As Arendt states: "the common world is what we enter when we are born and what we leave behind when we die. It transcends our lifespan into past and future alike . . . (ibid., 55)." It is the loss of this that is the real tragedy for Arendt. Expropriation turns us into free-floating beings not only because it makes us wage-laborers hunting for jobs but also because it turns us into creatures whose intinerant and precarious existence alienates us from the creation of the common world within which we ourselves are enveloped (ibid., 117, 254). Property, in Arendt's formulation, is what keeps us connected to the common world *but,* importantly, not bourgeois/capitalist property. "Proprietary livelihood" is, I am arguing, a good way to describe that other form of property.

I do not accept either Arendt's romantic pining for bygone ages or her suggestion that property necessarily necessarily solves the problems of expropriated freedom. However, I do think that her phenomenological framework can help us to understand why people like the Balmikis of Delhi might attempt to retain or re-establish ownership rights over their own

livelihoods. As discussed in the last chapter, those who inherit their client lists experience them

as inter-generational sources of subsistence and thus as resources that already exist when they are

born and will continue to exist for their families after they die. As I also discussed, the

perpetuity of the bodily sustenance that it provides allows them to fully participate and dwell in

their communities. It is with these thoughts in mind that I am arguing that proprietary livelihood

works as a form of resistance to the ravages of expropriated freedom.

Chapter 4

A Living Totem in a Megacity: The Transparently Social Wealth of a Balmiki big man

Introduction

During the early months of my fieldwork, the name Mor Singh loomed large and ominous. It seemed to conjure fear and disgust among those outside of its owner's immediate orbit but admiration and respect among those within it. Mor Singh was said to be a murderous leader of a criminal organization but also a generous benefactor and capable leader of the Balmiki community. His name would arise almost every time we were speaking of the city-wide affairs of the Balmikis. After getting to know him, I realized that the reactions to his name were exactly the ones he wanted: fear, admiration and, above all, the perception of notoriety.

Mor Singh is a token of a type in India and in much of the Global South. He's an organized crime figure who uses his wealth to gain influence within his community, his influence to gain more wealth, and his increased wealth and influence to gain political power, directly or indirectly. The aim of the political power is to reduce the risks associated with criminal activities. Such figures used to be common in areas that are now part of the Global North. In the United States, for example, there were famous characters like Boss Tweed, Al Capone and Lucky Luciano but also less well-known figures like Paul Kelly and Big Tim Sullivan (Welch 2008) who combined ties of ethnicity and locality with the tactics of violence and boastful charm to

gain wealth and political influence. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the U.S., such figures were common and often an integral part of urban "machine politics (Krase and LaCerra 1991, 112, 167ff; Allen 1993, 261–65)." Other famous figures that could be mentioned include Pablo Escobar of Columbia and Christopher Coke of Jamaica.

In India, some of the famous *dacoit* figures include *Mohar* Singh of the 50s and 60s (who will be discussed in more detail below), Phoolan Devi (the famous "Bandit Queen") and Veerappan. The latter makes a good example as he very openly and successfully used caste ties to garner support from a party that mainly represented members of his own caste.[1] Although Mor Singh's name would occasionally appear in the crime sections of Delhi papers, he is not famous outside of the city's Balmiki community. His lack of fame indicates that, though figures like him were not considered normal or acceptable by Delhi's mainstream citizens, they were common enough to be unremarkable.

Whether urban or rural, Indian or otherwise, characters such as these can be productively described as "big men" (Hansen 2005a, 184). There have been "big women" in India as well, notably Phoolan Devi, the famous "Bandit Queen." More pertinently, Tarini Bedi describes examples of charismatic women who become important figures within Mumbai's ultra right-wing Shiv Sena (Bedi 2016). In this chapter, I will present a reframing of the theory of the big man in a way that actually makes it inclusive of big women as well, although, because the central character of this chapter is a man, I will retain the language of "big men" for now.

It turns out that Mor Singh was very literally described as such a big man (*bare aadmi*) to me by several of his followers[2]. Perhaps more importantly, the notion of "big people" (in Hindi:

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[1] Rajesh Ramachandran, "Caste Politics May Bail Out Veerappan." *Times of India*. August 6th, 2000. https://www-chicagomanualofstyle-org.proxy.uchicago.edu/book/ed17/part3/ch14/psec191.html. Accessed 8/16/2022.
[2] Thomas Blom Hansen has also observed that such characters are referred to in this way in northern India ((Hansen 2005a, 184)

bare log) is very commonly deployed throughout the subcontinent to designate important people

capable of patronage (Sarkar 1992, 1546). The idea of the big man has been circulating among

anthropologists since at least 1963 (Lindstrom 1981; Brown 1990a), when Marshall Sahlins gave

it specific typological and theoretical content. Sahlins argued that the type of person that

Melanesians called a "big man" represented a new form of leadership and authority among the

people of those islands. Unlike a traditional chief who inherited titles, wealth, respect and

influence all at once, a big man had to earn all these things. Sahlins' theory thus offered us a

fairly simple application of Weber's classic distinction between ascribed status and achieved

status. In the case of the big men, they used charismatic authority (another Weberian descriptor)

to achieve a higher status than the one to which they were born.

What made the theory compelling was that Sahlins offered a way to describe a form of

leadership and authority that was neither "traditional" nor "modern." His big man did not have

the ascribed status granted by kinship, lineage, customary law and the like. Yet the big man did

not *achieve* status through success in rule governed processes such as elections, bureaucratic

promotions or market success. Sahlins writes:

> the indicative quality of big-man authority is everywhere the same: it is personal
> power. Big-men do not come to office, they do not succeed to, nor are they
> installed in, existing positions of political groups. The attainment of big-man
> status is rather a series of acts which elevate a person above the common herd
> about him and attract a coterie of loyal, lesser men (Sahlins 1963, 289).

The big man commands personal power but not in the traditional way. Sahlins goes on to say

that the big-man has two aspects. To the big man's in-group of followers, he is the influential

"center-man" around which followers cluster and around which resources, protection and favors

swirl (Sahlins 1963, 290). To others, the big man presents himself (with varying degrees of

success) as a "man of renown" who is "not so much a leader as he is some sort of hero (ibid)." The renown, of course, can be used to increase the size of the in-group, which then further increases the renown. This descriptive theorization of big men, I will show, describes Mor Singh and his social presence in Delhi's Balmiki community very well.

A big man has to start by creating an in-group or faction. The seeds of this faction are most often found among the aspiring big man's closest relatives (Sahlins 1963, 291). To sprout the faction the big man must develop "a name for cavalier generosity" and "establish relations of loyalty and obligation on the part of a number of people such that their production can be mobilized for renown building (ibid)." A successful big man creates a positive feedback loop between increasing renown and an ever-growing faction (ibid). But this feedback loop is always unstable. "A personal loyalty has to be . . . continually reinforced; if there is discontent it may well be severed. To create a faction takes time and effort, and to hold it, still more effort (Sahlins 1963, 292)." In other words, the big man can never rest and must constantly play the games of generosity, renown, assistance, mobilization and loyalty-testing that make him the authority figure that he is. I shall show that Mor Singh succeeded at this game right up until the point that he threatened to dislodge other power holders in Delhi's socio-political structure.

The concept of the big man has of course been reviewed, revised and debated in the literature ever since Sahlins first proposed it (Lindstrom 1981; Brown 1990a). It has been pointed out, by the way, that big women also existed in Melanesia (Brown 1990b). The terms "big men" and "big women" are now frequently used to describe influential figures in Africa, where, as in our case, the big man is often an urban figure whose activities frequently involve violence and illegality (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi 2012; Gibbs 2014; McCauley 2013). What

makes these figures big men rather than just organized crime bosses is that they deliberately keep a high profile by cultivating local fame and notoriety.

One weakness in the existing accounts of big men, including that of Sahlins' own, is that they are surprisingly economistic. The accounts are often at pains to distinguish themselves from the political science literature on patron-client relations (e.g., McCauley 2013); the big men and their followers usually appear as nothing more than utility maximizers. I will demonstrate that Mor Singh's relationship with his followers was more complicated than just *quid pro quo* exchanges of goods and favors, and that, in successfully positioning himself at the center of a faction, he became a living totem for the group. That is to say, he became an emblem around which the members of the faction form themselves into said faction. And, in the same process, Mor Singh became the particular type powerful person he was – a flamboyant big man – because the group demanded it of him. I do not mean to say that the pursuit of material wealth is not a part of that process. Rather, what I wish to say is that the social facts (in the Durkheimian sense) that exist among the followers of a big man cannot be disentangled from the material wealth that also exists among them, and that, in this way, their collective wealth constitutes the transparently social wealth that I have been discussing in this dissertation.

It is precisely at this juncture that my arguments about big men connect to my arguments about rent. In contrast to Thomas Blom Hansen, who saw the wealth of similar figures to be the "wages of violence[3]," mainstream economists would see the transparently social wealth of big men as rent[4] and think of the people themselves as rent-seekers and rent extractors. In their eyes, big men would be something like modern companies that invest early on in gaining brand

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[3] See his *Wages of Violence* (Hansen 2001).
[4] For clarification of this point, see the introduction and Chapter 6 of this dissertation.

recognition and then use those that recognition to either increase their market share, charge higher prices or both. The portion of the company's earnings that stem purely from its brand recognition would be rent.[5] Likewise, the big man invests in building a faction and developing renown, and the portion of his earnings that come from his reputation and renown would also be considered rent. Earnings that come from any sort of force, extortion or monopolization would be even less ambiguously considered rent. As a big man with many dubious and many downright criminal enterprises as well as ties to unions and political power, Mor Singh exemplifies the economists' notion of the rent-extractor. He is, in other words, earning the *rent* of violence rather than its wages.

I am not arguing that economists would be *wrong* to see the wealth of Mor Singh and similar big men as rent. As stated in the introduction, I hold the position that the category and concept of rent describes a phenomena that is itself a product of capitalist social relations.[6] It only makes sense to see the revenue of big men as rent because we live in a capitalist social reality in which the wealth of society exists as an "immense collection of commodities."[7] Only in such a world does it make sense to reduce the complex sociality of wealth to a discrete revenue.[8]

In emphasizing the role of the urban big man as living totem, I am offering a different point of view from that of Hansen and Verkaaik, who " . . . propose to see . . . the local big men as diviners of urban space, as people needed for their knowledge and agility" (Blom Hansen and

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[5] For clarification of this point, see the introduction and Chapter 6 of this dissertation.
[6] For clarification of this point, see the introduction and Chapter 6 of this dissertation.
[7] The first chapter of Marx's *Capital* begins thus: "The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities;' the individual commodity appears as it elementary form."
[8] See Marx's *Poverty of Philosophy* (1995, 175) and *Capital, Volume III* (1993, 755)

Verkaaik 2009, 17). To see big men in this way is still to see them as figures who deliver goods on a *quid pro quo* basis and to emphasize the subjectivity of the big man himself as an individual agent – it is *he* who does favors *for* his followers. Hansen and Verkaaik define the big man, along with hustlers and street-smart operators, as:

people whose gift it is to know the city and to act decisively, with style and without fear. These figures distribute certainty, they convince followers of their own special qualities and self-sufficiency and demonstrate new potential and possibility (Blom Hansen and Verkaaik 2009, 8).

Hansen and Verkaaik's description of the big man does not contradict my own, but it does portray the big man as if he formed his group through his own special powers. In my alternative formulation, in which the big man is a living totem, he *is made by* the group as much as he makes it. If his powers were truly unique to him, he could deliver his favors from behind the scenes, keeping a low profile. But big men tend to extravagantly advertise themselves because the widespread perception that they have a group behind them is what gives them their power vis-a-vis other big men, politicians and the police. The group, meanwhile, feels that it is safe and powerful because of its groupness, but the groupness can only exist through the mediation of some mechanism of solidarity – a collective representation, a totem. The totem could be an image but it could also be a living person, who, when not around, is anyway nothing but a collective representation. Much of the power that the big man's factional group feels is exaggerated through collective effervescence, but even its real portions depend on that collective effervescence because it is the perception of the group as passionately united behind that makes other powerful actors respect them.

It is the perspective of this dissertation that Mor Singh's status and role in his milieu is a predictable outcome of the socio-economic conditions that prevail in his surroundings. As

mentioned in the introduction, the prevailing conditions of Delhi in the early twentieth century

have been variously described as post-colonial (Bayly 1999; I. Buchanan, Varghese, and Manoj

2022; Chakrabarty 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Mbembe 2001; Misri 2014; Paranjape

2016), neo-liberal (Balagopalan 2014; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Kabra 2017; Mishra and

Nayak 2020; Oza 2006) or controlled by a "weak state" (Krasner 1984; Evans et al. 1985;

Migdal 1987; Hamilton and Sutton 1989; Lehman 1992). While all of these terms are partially

appropriate for describing the prevailing conditions of early twenty-first century Delhi, this

dissertation takes the position that the condition most relevant to its subject matter is best

described as one of expropriated freedom governed by a weak state. That is to say, it is a set of

conditions in which the people cannot control the means of production and the state cannot

effectively enforce either the rules of a well-functioning market or their own rules regarding

access to redistributed wealth. Thus most people live in a state of great economic insecurity but,

unlike their counterparts in places with strong states, they are neither fully protected by

bourgeois law nor properly aided by a managerial-interventionist state. These conditions result

in high degrees of both legal and economic precariousness which cause people to seek out

protection from non-state power brokers who often gain their power through illegal means. In

conditions of mismanaged capitalism, these power brokers tend to be big men.

Ideological leaders can sometimes resemble big men, as we saw in Thomas Blom Hansen's

work. Unlike the religious and ethno-nationalist organizations that he described in *Wages of

Violence*, which closely resemble the fascist organizations of interwar Europe, urban big men

much more commonly resemble Javeed, a local strongman that Hansen describes in another

work (2005). Javeed had grown up in a tenement, left school early, and become locally known

wrestler (*pehlwan*) (ibid, 188). Javeed became a local organized crime figure known as a *bhai*

("brother") or a *dada* ("grandfather") who clashed with and murdered an existing *dada* and

ended up in jail (ibid, 189). He was able to get himself out of jail, form a successful and legal

business, and remain an influential person with a capacity to do important favors for people. He

also had a reputation for defending his community, that is, his Muslim community, from outside

threats (ibid, 189). As we shall see, his story closely parallels that of Mor Singh.

These local big men often resemble India's famous rural bandits and the mafia "dons"

that are portrayed in both Bollywood and Hollywood cinema. Indeed they deliberately identify

themselves with them (in our first meeting, Mor Singh exclaimed to me "I'm a Don. Mafia!

Mafia! ["*Mai Don hoon. Mafia! Mafia*!]"). Like those purveyors of violence, these figures tend

to be pragmatic rather than doctrinaire. To the extent that they think about long-term goals, they

tend to make those goals about reshaping their own operations rather than reshaping society. Big

men such as these are woven into the fabric of both rural and urban Indian life.

This chapter on Mor Singh's social presence within the Balmiki community is intended to

be a case study of such big men but it is also intended to be something more. I hope to show that

figures like Mor Singh must be understood with respect to the dialectics of rent. That is to say,

we must understand them as rent extractors and rent seekers while simultaneously also

understanding the rent itself as a by-product of a sociality that resists an otherwise pervasive

force of commodification. This sociality has complexly personal and interactive dynamics such

that the wealth associated with it can be considered transparently social. Such wealth is precisely

what appears to economists as rent. So there is never a good reason to say that big men like Mor

Singh earn either the profits or the wages of violence. They earn the rents of violence, but this rent must be understood as a dialectical permutation of transparently social wealth.

I will show that Mor Singh's methods of acquiring wealth was (and is) suffused with rent generating activities that range from real estate deals to outright extortion. I will show that Mor Singh's rise and partial fall happened in four stages. In the first, like the big men of Sahlins' classic article, he began his career with a group of close contacts (his brothers) and a willingness to use violence. In the second, he successfully played social games with his growing in-group to become a living totem for his followers. In the third, he expanded is reputation to an outer circle of the wider Balmiki community and, finally, in the fourth, he attempted to gain state power by inserting himself among the existing power brokers within the Delhi government. It was in this last stage that he overreached and met with a punishing backlash.

The Image of Mor Singh within the Balmiki Community

The first time Mor Singh's name was mentioned to me, it was uttered with palpable fear. It happened at an interview with a man who helped organize the main Delhi festivities of Valmiki Jayanti, the annual celebration of Maharishi Valmiki's birthday. The man, Jai Prakash, was a government employee, who, like many people in his position, regularly volunteered with community organizations, including the Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav Samiti (the premier organizer of the annual procession and celebration). Mr. Prakash's discomfort became immediately apparent because he did not grant me permission to record the interview or even take notes. This had never happened before and was especially surprising because my research assistant was well acquainted with him and had arranged this interview in the same way that he

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had done many others. After some conversation about his current work with a local youth group, I moved the conversation toward my primary topic of interest: the sources of funding for the annual parade and celebration of the caste's patron saint, Maharishi Valmiki. He didn't really answer me, but instead spoke under his breath to my research assistant. He said that Valmiki Jayanti had been funded by donations collected from the community but that it was now – he lowered his voice even further – Mor Singh and his allies who were financing the whole event. They were doing so out of pocket, he said, in order to get political benefits. Still talking to my research assistant more than to me, he said, "*Hamare samaj kaphi niche aa gaye hai*" ["our caste has gone down a lot"], by which he meant that its moral character, especially that of the leadership, had been corrupted. Nobody did selfless work anymore, he lamented. As soon as I probed for more information on the Valmiki Jayanti organization, he said that he was busy and asked us to leave.

After the interview, I asked my research assistant to explain why this educated, mid-level government employee seemed so profoundly uncomfortable and fearful. I thought that perhaps, as the former cashier of the organization, he was afraid that he would himself be exposed for some malfeasance. My assistant insisted that Mr. Prakash had an impeccable reputation for honesty and believed instead that he was afraid because he had said negative things about Mor Singh, who my assistant described as a notorious Balmiki "bhai" and "don" reputed to have been involved in murder and extortion.[9] According to my research assistant, Mor Singh was taking over the Valmiki Jayanti organization in order to launch his own political career. Mr. Prakash was apparently torn between his desire to be honest and his fear of Mor Singh.

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[9] The word *bhai* ["brother"] is a colloquial term for leaders of organized crime as is *don,* which presumably entered the colloquial lexicon from Hindi films like the 1978 film, *Don,* which borrowed the term from American films like *The Godfather.*

After that incident, Mor Singh's name arose again and again. Some time later, an opportunity to meet Mor Singh arose but my research assistant advised me not to do so, saying that he was a *khatarnak aadmi* [dangerous man] who had killed people. I decided to go ahead and meet him anyway. He was interested in meeting me, partly because I was a novelty and partly because he wanted to have a central place in an American's story about the Balmiki community. I was, understandably, quite nervous.

Land, Money, Violence and the Expanding In-group

All aspects of my first face-to-face encounter with Mor Singh were nerve-racking because they seemed to affirm his reputation so well. We initially met near a permanent flower stand, the owner of which he seemed to know. With a stocky, solid stature and one eye slightly off-place, he seemed as if he had been dispatched from central casting. He was wearing all white; not the *khadi* favored by politicians but a neatly pressed safari suit. He gave me a single, red rose, something that no other Indian had ever given me but which nevertheless seemed to be in keeping with his mafioso image. He then took me to his otherwise unoccupied SUV. Being alone in a vehicle with this menacing but still nice fellow only exacerbated my anxiety.

His attempted graciousness and very real kindness did not quell my nerves as we sat alone in his car. I had my recording device in full view and was about to ask him permission to turn it on when he started bragging in a raised voice about the murders that he had committed. With my nervousness now turning to fear, I turned off my voice recorder because I was afraid that he might be an unstable mobster who would later realize he had just confessed capital crimes on my device. He insisted that he had only ever killed people who deserved it; people who had

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either exploited the Balmiki community or otherwise harmed the poor and the helpless. Upper castes and other powerful people were against him, he said, because he was uplifting his community and threatening their position. But they could not keep him down, he boasted, because he had such a strong support base among the people that he was an unstoppable force. He told me that he had been in jail and that even from there he had had several of his enemies killed. I asked if he wanted me to use his real name in the papers that I would publish about him. He was surprised that I would ask him such a thing and said that he had nothing to hide. Then he asked if I had heard of him. I said that I had heard that he was an important leader of the Balmiki community. But he wanted to know if I heard of what he had done and how powerful he was. Finding myself nervous, once again, I prevaricated and reiterated that I had only heard of him as an important leader. He seemed disappointed and a bit angry. In a raised voice he said, "mai don hun! Mafia! Mafia!" ["I'm a 'don!' Mafia! Mafia!]. Mor Singh apparently had no interest in hiding his misdeeds, he was proud of his reputation as a *khatarnak aadmi* and wanted to be seen as an avenging angel for his own caste and for Dalits in general. This bombastic theatricality is what made him a big man rather than "just" a mafia boss.

It is of course very hard to know the truth of Mor Singh's rise to power. It was said that he had been involved in the "bhu mafia" or land mafia. The land mafia is a notorious form of organized crime in India. One finds it commonly associated with political corruption in the mainstream press and there have been Bollywood films and TV serials made about the topic as well.[10] It was commonly said about Mor Singh that he and his brothers used violence to force people to sell land and bribery to get authorization for certain deals. His eldest brother, a lawyer,

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[10] See "Congress Image Takes a Beating" by Sujay Mehdudia. *Times of India.* Online Edition. June 28th, 2008. See also *Bhu Mafia* from Yaduvanshi Film Production House and *Bhu Mafia* Web Series by FNP media.

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was said to be the strategist and money-maker of the operation. As I pressed him on his early days, he did not admit to using violence but he did give some clues that support the narrative contained in the rumors.

On one occasion (Jan. 31, 2004), Mor Singh told me that he was in the housing and real estate business and, with a wink, he told me that he could solve any land-related problem. He again and again emphasized his influence and power. I asked him how he got into that business, which made him laugh a bit and replied that it was a very difficult field to enter. Another person who was riding in the car with us added that he got into the business through strength, he repeated that Mor Singh is a strong man and that, with strength, one could do anything. Mor Singh also mentioned his career as a wrestler, implying that the reputation for physical strength was somehow relevant. This whole conversation occurred with some wry smiles, as if I was supposed to understand some unspoken message.

On another occasion, I pushed him to discuss details about his early days, a conversation that gradually revealed a lot about how he made his money. In what follows, I attempt to reveal the murky workings of Mor Singh's "business model." I will reveal the story in much the same way it was revealed to me during the course of my field work, which is to say in dribs and drabs of small clues. Some came from my own probing but many also came from bragging, obeisance and simple off-guard moments. I'm approaching the story in this way in order to convey the very fine balance that Mor Singh and his brothers and followers had to strike between their need to display their willingness to use force and their need for secrecy.

In the following conversation, Mor Singh had been telling me about all the people who had held him back. He had also mentioned in passing that he had started to do financing work from an early age. I probed him on this issue:

> Omar: So, when you were an adolescent, 16 years old, you started doing financing work, who stopped you . . . .
> Mor Singh: I did both financing and building work
> Omar: Good, good.
> Mor Singh: I used to be successful as a builder, and with a lot of struggle, I had great work in 1980. In 1984, Indira Gandhi was killed. After that, I had big jobs, I earned a lot money in the building industry.
> Mor Singh: what financing? I had a greater income . . . People who have good income and sources and who have a luxurious life, those who have money, they don't have money problems. Luxury life . . . I don't have a luxury life. Yes sir. Therefore everything goes safely, I make capital. I didn't make the capital in one day. I had a predilection for saving.   It took a long time, I gathered up a little bit at a time.
> Omar: So, the first building that you financed . . .
> Mor Singh: No, I made the first one myself.
> Was it a shanty-type or a solid house?
> Mor Singh: No, no, there were those resettlement colonies, I got started in those.
> Omar: So you would buy plots of land, have a house made, and then sell it?
> Mor Singh: I sold them, then a little margin would come.

Given that this is a man who had boasted about using fatal violence on numerous occasions, and had spent several years in jail, one can make the educated guess that the stories of his use of violence were at least partly true. The resettlement colonies of which he was speaking are tracts of land that were set up by different governing authorities in order to provide land to victims of slum clearance. These were large, flat tracts of land that were divided into individual plots and allotted to the displaced slum-dwellers. The allottees were allowed to build whatever structures they could afford but they were not given freehold property rights, meaning they could not sell the plots at will. In fact, they officially had to pay small annual licensing fees to remain on the

plots.[11] As an aside, resettlement colonies were often places where Balmikis found work as manual scavengers because most resettlement colonies were initially built without sewage systems.

Predictably enough, it became common for people to sell their plots. One DDA official told me that the same people would set up new, unauthorized shanties and get new plots, although I encountered no cases of that happening. What was clear was that the allottees were willing to sell at good prices because they were poor and in constant need of cash. Likely too was that organized crime figures would make them "offers they couldn't refuse." The plots were small, 25 square yards in the early days and 12.5 square yards later on. Buyers would often want larger plots and so it was highly advantageous to have access to adjacent plots of land. Figures like Mor Singh and his brothers would convince people with contiguous plots to sell. Because the DDA and other authorities were supposed collect annual fees, they would check up on residents from time to time and so officials would have to be bribed as would the officials handing out the relevant licenses and permits. So, in essence, the resettlement colonies were places in which land could be acquired illegally but cheaply and then sold at considerable gain. Such a gain is one that both classical and neo-classical economists would call a rent.

As we saw above, Mor Singh himself claims that he also built the actual houses in his youth. According to his own story, he was good at saving money and this allowed him to expand and start doing the work he called "financing." Mor Singh and his brothers were clearly not running a bank and so we can quite safely assume that he was engaged in illegal lending activities. He told me that he primarily financed building projects. Once again, much or most of

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[11] https://delhishelterboard.in/main/?page_id=86 ("JJR Colonies"). Last accessed 10/9/2022.

the income derived from such activities – certainly the parts that turned Mor Singh into a wealthy man – are forms of rent.

It appears that at some point in his career, Mor Singh went beyond extortionary land deals to just plain old extortion. He was arrested with one of his brothers in 2000 for extorting money from shopkeepers in the area of Delhi known as Darya Ganj.[12] It was apparently a classic protection racket. He and his lawyers challenged the arrest on numerous grounds but the judge ruled against them. The judgment mentions his prior arrests and gives a sense of his criminal history (unfortunately, I was not able to track down all the original cases and reports). Although, it must be mentioned, that the police had never been able to actually convict him of any crime (his jail stints were all pre-trial).

In the 2001 ruling against Mor Singh, the petitioner is listed as "Jagmohan @ Mor Singh." Jagmohan is Mor Singh's real name, the "@" symbol stands for "alias." The judgment describes some of Mor Singh's previous crimes:

> Petitioner [Mor Singh] was involved in the case of Killing of Pawan Gulati with fire arm on 19th August, 1996 for which case FIR No. 853/96 was registered. He committed another offence registered vide FIR No. 427/96 under Section 392 IPC, PS Vasant Vihar, Delhi. It is the case of the detaining Authority that even the judicial custody did not deter the petitioner from conspiring and committing crimes and threatening the public witnesses in Tis Hazari Courts who had come to depose against him.[13]

Apparently Mor Singh had killed Pawan Gulati, another shopkeeper back in 1996 because he was cooperating as a witness in another case. In that case, a small restaurant owner had asked Mor Singh and his brothers to pay 70,000 rupees for all the food they had eaten over many years.

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[12] "Darya Ganj Businessman's Biggest Bugbear held." *The Tribune (Chandigarh).* September 14, 2005. https://www.tribuneindia.com/2005/20050915/delhi.htm. Accessed 8/16/2022.
[13] Delhi High Court. Jagmohan Mohar Singh v. U.O.I & Others on 9 July, 2001.

They physically assaulted and stabbed him. Pawan Gulati and his brothers were willing to act as a witnesses but Mor Singh fired bullets at the three of them, killing Pawan. His brothers courageously continued to cooperate with the police even after getting assaulted at the courthouse. One of the brothers was found murdered some time later although there was insufficient evidence to convict Mor Singh and his brothers.[14]

It is also notable that the text of the judgment confirmed what Mor Singh had told me in in his car when it says "judicial custody did not stop [Mor Singh] from committing crimes and threatening public witnesses." Mor Singh had bragged to me that he had people killed from his jail cell; he did not, however, tell me that it was to eliminate and intimidate people who were going to testify against him.

In August of 2000, the police had received an anonymous tip about his protection racket in Darya Ganj but the police were unable to get anyone to testify. According to the text of the judgment, he had publicly told the shop owners as well and everyone on the street that he would kill anyone working with the police just as he had killed Pawan Gulati, his brother and another shopkeeper. Mor Singh was not only unafraid to use violence, he was unafraid to announce this fact to the world.

In 2005 Mor Singh was arrested again (the circumstances of this arrest will be described in more detail below). The text of this judgment reveals more about how Mor Singh (a.k.a. Mohar Singh) made his money:

> The petitioner Jag Mohan @ Mohar Singh is running a crime syndicate along with his four brothers and have involved themselves in offences of criminal intimidation, broad day light killing of witnesses, forceful dispossession of properties etc. for monetary gains. During the police remand of four days, various

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[14] Delhi High Court. Jag Mohan @ Mor Singh v. Commissioner of Police and Others on 1 December, 2006.

documents were recovered and seized. These documents revealed that the petitioner was owner of several properties and vehicles. One such property is House No. F-230 Mangal Bazar, Laxmi Nagar. Prabhu Dayal, the person residing in that property lodged an FIR (No. 350/96) alleging criminal intimidation with the help of a firearm to force him to vacate the house. His statement under Section 161 Cr.P.C. has since been recorded. The petitioner and his brothers illegally grabbed part of property No. 3814, David Street and dispossessed the owner Bobby Kapoor and the tenant Surender Mohan who have also made their statements under Section 161 Cr.P.C. The petitioner and his brothers also attempted to grab property No. 3828, David Street, Darya Ganj and to dispossess the owner Sanjay Bhandari. It has also been discovered that the petitioner and his brothers threatened Rajiv Sun, owner of property No. S-82, Greater Kailash, Part-I. The petitioner and Ms.Thala, another person claiming ownership of the same property, were arrested in a murder case in 1996 P.S. Kotwali. Rajiv Sun had already made his statement under Section 161 Cr.P.C. The application also disclosed what other evidence was expected to be obtained during further investigation. The special court extended the judicial remand till 11.1.2006 only after examining the statements under Section 161 Cr.P.C. of the aforesaid victims. In another application arrest warrants were requested against the brothers of the petitioner viz. Jai Chand @ Munna, Brij Mohan @ Pappu, Khoob Singh and Sher Singh and the special court passed orders on 6.12.2005 for NBWs as prayed for.[15]

Forcing people to give up their property was evidently another aspect of Mor Singh's business plan. One can imagine that early on, when he was building houses and making real estate deals in resettlement colonies that he was similarly using force to obtain contiguous plots and gain other market advantages.

A judgment issued in 2014 provides further evidence of another method that Mor Singh used to make money. Singh and his brother had a rented a room in the Greater Kailash area of Delhi and then attempted to claim ownership of the property:

It was alleged that accused and his brothers had threatened Bobby Kapoor and forcibly occupied property No. 3814. One portion of the said property was let out by mother of Bobby Kapoor to Jag Mohan @ Mohar Singh and his brothers as a tenant but accused and his brothers illegally occupied the property and declared

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[15] *ibid*

themselves as owners. Several civil litigations were going on between parties and were pending in different Courts. [16]

Likely they would make money by renting the property to others.   The judgment further stated:

> It was further alleged that terror of the Crime Syndicate was of a such a high degree that almost all the witnesses were scared of them. Crime Syndicate was in the habit of threatening and then eliminating witnesses and they used to grab property of innocent victims. They had no fear of law of land and they had been committing crimes with impunity without getting punished as they always managed to scare the witnesses. Challan was filed against accused Jai Chand @ Munna for the offence punishable under Section 3 (2) & 3 (4) of MCOCA. Sanction was also obtained under Section 23 (2) of MCOCA. It was further submitted that investigation qua accused Khoob Singh and Brij Mohan @ Pappu was going on and separate challan will be filed against them.[17]

So it seems that Mor Singh's money schemes ranged from the mildly corrupt to the outright extortionate and all were backed up by the ability to violently and successfully intimidate resisters and witnesses.   Given that the case proclaims that Mor Singh and his brothers had no fear of the law and that they had been involved in these kinds of activities for around forty years, it seems improbable that members of the government and police were not also involved in some capacity.

Mor Singh Expands his In-Group

In keeping with Sahlins' theory, Mor Singh's in-group had started with family members, his four brothers. His first expansion was to a network of workers from the Balmiki community. His youngest brother told me that they initially formed a team of workers to help build the homes. He told me that they didn't deliberately hire Balmikis but that their network of extended family

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[16] Delhi District Court. State vs Jag Mohan @ Mohar Singh & Another on 27 March, 2014
[17] *ibid*

and friends just tended to be a part of the *biraderi* (the caste brethren). It is important to

remember that castes are endogamous groups and so a good number of anyone's contact network

would have been distant relatives. It's also important to remember that jobs of any kind are

welcome among the impoverished community and jobs that don't involve waste are especially

sought after. Did this group of family and friends participate in violence or threats of violence?

No one would admit to it, of course. Did that group of kin and friends have a kind of gang

mentality? It seems likely.

To expand beyond his in-group of family, Balmiki brethren and organized crime

contacts, Mor Singh decided to become an important person within established organizations of

the Balmiki community. This included religious groups, social service organizations and the

sanitation worker unions. It quickly became clear to me that he had very well-established

connections among the leaders of a sanitation workers' union called the Delhi Nagar Nigam

Safai Majdoor Sangh. At the time of my research, this union represented about 18,000 out of the

approximately 45,000 *safai karmachariyon* of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi. They were

said to be the biggest single union for sanitation workers and had a reputation for being the most

active. During the time of my research, they were the only sanitation workers' union that I saw

mentioned in either the Hindi or English language press.

I had cultivated a relationship with the president of the union well before I had met Mor

Singh. Bal Kishan Mahar, a gregarious and fundamentally nice fellow, was also a loud and

proud grassroots union organizer who regularly organized demonstrations about issues

concerning MCD sanitation workers. He seemed to hold court regularly at his home, where he

was visited by various activists of the Balmiki community. Mahar had told me that union dues

were only 2 rupees per person per month. Although the union seemed to keep a very low overhead, that still did not seem like sufficient funds for their activities. Mahar himself sponsored an incredibly lavish wedding for his daughter, an event that made me further wonder where the money was coming from. One day, while on one of my fairly routine visits to see Mahar, there was a man there who seemed to command all the attention of the room and dominated conversation. The usually gregarious Mahar was quiet and completely deferential. Unusual for him, he didn't introduce me because he seemed afraid to interrupt the speaker for even a second. I later discovered that this person was Mor Singh and it was through this connection that I later met Mor Singh personally.

Unlike his involvement with the various Balmiki social service organizations, Mor Singh kept his involvement with the union at a low profile. He never mentioned it to me when I was with him and he never showed up to union protests. Given that the dues were so low, Mor Singh and brothers would not have been interested in the union to simply skim off the top. Much more likely they were taking a cut from the vast economy of MCD bribery that I described in Chapter 2. Common sense can suggest multiple other reasons that someone like Mor Singh might be interested in union connections. The first is that its activities might be useful for money laundering. Another is that it might be able provide a certain amount of people-power (possibly even for violent purposes). Yet another is that the union's leaders could use their platform to aggrandize Mor Singh (they indeed did do so), something that would help him gain general influence within the community. This general influence combined with more direct pull within the union might enable him to command votes, a power that he could use to curry favor with existing politicians or get himself elected should he choose to run for office. We know that in

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other contexts organized crime leaders have cultivated relationships with unions for similar reasons (Jacobs and Peters 2003).

Later in my fieldwork, I was preparing to go with Mahar to an event in Chandigarh. I had met him at a restaurant where Mor Singh and his eldest brother, a lawyer, were also present. As we were preparing to leave, I saw Mahar ask Mor Singh's brother (the reputed "brains" of the operation") for some money, which the latter gave him readily (I couldn't see how much but it was clearly several hundred rupees). Mahar seemed be a bit embarrassed to be doing this in front of me, but he otherwise seemed to be doing something routine. Mor Singh and his brothers were not interested in the union as a money generating activity. On the contrary, they were subsidizing it. Rather, they were interested in it as a way of expanding his inner faction as well as his fame and renown in the wider community. Mahar was part of their patronage network and, by extension, so were the network of union activists that surrounded Mahar. Mahar and the others would regularly sing the praises of Mor Singh, thus raising his profile among sanitation workers and other Balmikis. The labor-power, legitimacy, and fame that the union could provide would prove fruitful after his second arrest.

Mor Singh also cultivated connections with temples and organizations dedicated to Maharishi Valmiki. I already mentioned that Mor Singh had controversially made himself the leader of one of the key Maharishi Valmiki celebratory organizations. I also accompanied Mor Singh on numerous trips in which he was honored as a key supporter of a Balmiki social service organization or as the key patron of a new Balmiki temple. I will discuss these matters further below but the key point here is that Mor Singh used his Balmiki connections and Balmiki identity to expand his in-group and gain renown among an out-group.

Rent Seeking and Rent Extraction in Mor Singh's Operation

There is nothing terribly surprising about Mor Singh's money generating activities. They consist of schemes that are commonly associated with organized crime and corrupt politics: protection rackets, union manipulation, the sale of government allocated resources, the skirting of government regulations and noncompetitive lending. Economists would label these sorts of activities as either "rent-seeking" or "rent-extractive" behavior (Ornelas 2018). Let us review the specifics of how Mor Singh's methods of earning money are rent-based.

If, in his early years, Mor Singh was primarily engaged in building houses in resettlement colonies, then he was most definitely earning rent. As mentioned, this land was designated as land for relocated slum-dwellers who were not themselves allowed to sell it. By being willing to break the law (bribing officials and using violence), Mor Singh was able to purchase plots of land significantly below their market values. Mor Singh and his brothers almost certainly used force to obtain contiguous plots, thus getting the property at much cheaper rates than would have otherwise been possible. Gains associated with land sales always involve large portions of rent, but, in this case, in which the seller did not have to pay the full rent to the previous owners, who themselves did not pay any rent to anyone (because it was granted to them by the government), the amount of rent extraction would have been very high. To the extent that he was actually building houses, then he must have been earning some wages and profits as well, but Mor Singh and his brothers would have had no competitive edge in the home building field and so the only reason to enter this sort of market would have come from their willingness to take the risks associated with the illegalities that enabled excessive rent extraction.

Another portion of his income came from financing other people's building projects. Mor Singh and his brothers were not running a bank and so they were not operating in a competitive market for capital. Moreover, they were financing projects that could only yield gains because they were occurring illegally on land that could not be freely bought and sold; this was so in part because of government restrictions and in part because he and other violent actors would prevent it. Builders who want to build under such conditions would clearly need to turn to illegal capital markets. They would hope to earn the same sorts of rents that Mor Singh did when he was building houses and then use those rents to pay off the loan, meaning that they would be redirecting rents toward Mor Singh and his brothers via the financing arrangements.

Cultivating Renown through Virtue and Cavalier Generosity

The benefits of building up this initial wealth and reputation for violence would have been quite limited because the world of violent rent extractors is a competitive and risky one. Friends and allies in high places are vital, as is support from strong young men. In India, the protections offered by elected officials, particularly those of the dominant political party, are indispensable. To obtain such protections, Mor Singh had to show that he had at least the potential to deliver votes and, to do that, he had to become something more than just a petty crime boss.

At our first meeting, he had handed me a greeting card that announced him as the "Chairman, Valmiki Jayanti Janmotsav Samiti" (the same organization of which Jai Prakash had been treasurer). The exchange of greeting cards was a ubiquitous practice during my fieldwork. Some of these were the type of business cards that we are familiar with in the US, but the majority that I received (due to my research interests) actually showed membership in some

charitable or political organization. Beyond simple membership, they almost always also indicated a position such as treasurer, secretary, etc. For the employed, the distribution of such cards gave a sense of legitimacy to one's volunteer work as well as to the organization itself. For the unemployed, such cards gave legitimacy to one's very existence. Mor Singh's card showed that he was now in control of one of the premier Balmiki organizations in Delhi and, moreover, that he had altruistic intentions toward his community. It also allowed him to announce a publicly acceptable social role, something he could not do with his other activities. All of this would have helped him appear to have the capacity to deliver votes.

He was in fact very deliberately cultivating a Robin Hood image. His name, a pseudonym, was drawn from one of the most famous bandits or *dacoits* in India, Mohar Singh (the Mor Singh I knew would sometimes spell his name that way too). That dacoit operated in a desolate area well south of Madhya Pradesh in the fifties and sixties. After publicly surrendering with his large gang to the popular statesman JP Narayan in 1972, Mohar Singh became the subject and star of a few Bollywood movies (and the inspiration for many more), managing to maintain his nation-wide fame and mystique until his death in 2020. One article about his death read:

> In that time his gang kidnapped local officials as well as rival criminals, earning huge ransoms which he distributed among the poor, funding weddings for local villagers. His generosity earned him the love of the local population, despite his fearsome reputation[18]

In the same article, it was also written that:

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[18] "Mohar Singh, the bandit hailed as India's Robin Hood, dies at 93" by Hugh Tomlinson. *The Times.* May 6th 2020. times.co.uk. Accessed Jun2 21st, 2021.

His prize catch was a smuggler of religious idols, lured to Madhya Pradesh in 1967 with the promise of a huge bounty looted from local temples. Singh kidnapped him, only freeing the smuggler for a ransom of 2.6 million rupees.[19]

Mor Singh of Delhi's Balmiki community wanted to be remembered in the same way as this more famous *dacoit* – as a savior of the poor and a defender of temples.

Mor Singh would often talk of his many good deeds and otherwise try to portray himself as a virtuous man. It is important to note that Mor Singh saw me as a kind of reporter. While I explained to him that I was a researcher doing a doctorate in Anthropology, he was most interested in when it would be published. He often asked me about when my "lekh" – written work or article – was going to be published. Add to this that I very often had out my voice recorder and notebook, it is pretty safe to assume he was hoping that both his words and his actions would reach a wider audience through me.

For our second meeting and interview, Mor Singh picked me up in his car and then went on to pick up a father and daughter whom he was taking to the hospital. The girl had chronic respiratory problems and he was helping them with rides and medical bills because they were poor Balmikis. They were not blood relatives, he explained, but he liked helping people. At another encounter, he had similarly arranged it so that he would pick up a South Indian woman and drop her off at the train station. I suspect that he engineered these encounters so that I would witness these charitable acts.

At another meeting (on New Year's Eve of 2004), Mor Singh took me to a popular Delhi restaurant (Nirula's in Gole Market). He had come with one of his brothers and another man who was apparently a doctor. Both men were wearing double-breasted suits. The sartorial

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[19] *ibid.*

signification of the suit is complex among Balmikis. Much more so than at upper caste events, Western-style suits were commonly worn at weddings and other formal occasions, especially by the young men, who appeared to take great pride in them. Their suits were clearly well tailored and the men were clearly signaling both their wealth and their apparent respect for me as a foreign researcher/journalist. Mor Singh, on the other hand, wore what he always wore: a pure white, light cotton safari suit with a wool vest (because it was winter). It was not the *khadi kurta pyjama* favored by politicians but clearly gesturing in that direction (Chakrabarty 2002, 53); I guess that he was trying to communicate the fact that he was a would-be politician while eschewing the notion that he had any political ambition whatsoever.

At the lunch, I was asked both if I ate meat and if I drank alcohol. Admitting to meat and alcohol consumption is always a socially risky thing to do in India. The Balmikis with whom I had had close relationships until that point, were mostly poor but fairly well educated slum dwellers, the children or relatives of MCD *safai karamcharis* who quite liberally drank and ate meat. Within that millieu, consuming those things was either just normal or taken as a signal of camaraderie against the upper castes and classes. Based on these experiences, I admitted to both and lamb kebabs and beer were ordered for me. None of the others had any meat or beer and Mor Singh made it clear he was both a teetotaler and a vegetarian. I felt at the time that I had completely misplayed my hand in a social game but, upon reflection, it is perfectly possible that I inadvertently paid respect to Mor Singh by positioning myself as an inferior. Whether I won or lost, it was clear that Mor Singh had pulled me into a social game.

A thing about Mor Singh that I was shocked to learn was that his own personal accommodations were extremely modest. He lived in a *barsaati,* a small (probaby about 8' by

10') room on a rooftop. These rooms are common in India but are usually used as servant's quarters. His had a mattress on the floor and almost no other furniture. When I accompanied him there, he very matter-of-factly, brought out an iron and pressed a new pair of pants. What was even more surprising is that we had just come from a *haveli,* a large and fancy house, across the street in which his brothers lived. As we'll see from some of the court cases against Mor Singh, it's not clear who owned what, if anything in Mor Singh's family, but it is clear that Mor Singh had chosen these very modest accommodations. I did not have the impression at all that this was some sort of performance for my benefit; it was clearly his bedroom.

Like the famous rural *dacoit* mentioned above*,* Mor Singh seemed to think that helping women to get married was a particularly virtuous deed. That was of course an attitude deeply embedded in patriarchal society. That being said, the life of unmarried women in India remains very difficult and arranging marriages for them is certainly seen as a noble act. At a public meeting held at his office, which had a large room that was set up as a kind of auditorium/court, he told me that he had had 101 women married the previous year. On another occasion, he mentioned having had 25 women married.   He also bragged that a woman came asking to get married at 7 am and he had found her a husband by evening. The ability to arrange marriages on short notice would certainly indicate the possession of considerable social resources. The veracity of these stories is very much in question but Mor Singh was unquestionably trying to cultivate a reputation of being a powerful savior.

There is also no doubt that many people, especially Balmikis, saw him as a person with the capacity to help them. Mor Singh and his family owned a good sized, three-story building on a corner in the Darya Ganj area of Old Delhi.   Property in that part of the city was extremely

valuable. Within the building, there was a large, open room that was set up like a small auditorium with several rows of chairs facing Mor Singh's large desk and impressively sized office chair. Whenever Mor Singh was there, there was usually quite a lot of activity. Indeed, he seemed a bit like a medieval lord holding court as he would sit at his desk and make extended commentaries as people asked for favors and advice. Everyone deferred to him and he was always the center of attention.

One time, I witnessed a poor woman saying that she had come to ask for *izzat*, a world that literally means honor but also carries a connotation of reciprocation or restoration of honor. She apparently owed Rs.3,500 of Rs. 30,000 on a *jhuggie* (shanty) she occupied in Inderlok. She was a Muslim woman, Mor Singh told me, whose son had been in prison for seven years. Singh said that the son had been given a 10 year term but that he had gotten the sentence reduced to 7. I asked him if the boy was guilty or not. He said that he didn't know but added with pride, "I help anyone. I'll even help prostitutes." Emphasizing his selflessness, he rhetorically asked, "what can this woman do for me?" One wonders, of course, if he had had something to do with the boy's initial arrest; I had no way of knowing, of course, but the fact that she was asking *izzat* implies that she felt that Mor Singh owed her something. To top all this off, Mor Singh ended this conversation by proudly proclaiming another good deed: he had once caught a woman's rapist and had him killed. Mor Singh also showed me a drawer full of letters from people making similar pleas for help. Many were just pleas for financial assistance in the face of misfortune but many others were pleas for him to help resolve a dispute or a perceived injustice. Mor Singh was acting like a local nobleman, a *shareef*.

These "court" sessions, were often populated by people who ran some sort of non-profit organization. These were usually volunteer Balmiki organizations that provided services to the poor, such as tutoring, vocational training and basic medical care. The organizations were frequently affiliated with a Maharishi Valmiki temple, although they also frequently identified themselves as Ambedkarite groups offering general services to Dalits (as far as I could tell, however, they were all run by Balmikis). It is important to understand that such organizations are extremely common India and they act as men's clubs as much as serious mechanisms of aid. The leaders of such organizations – accompanied by a retinue of family and friends – would come to these meetings with the hope of gaining some combination of financial support and recognition from Mor Singh. They would, of course, have to pay obeisance to him, listening approvingly to his often lengthy orations about caste injustice, politics and general social issues.

And Mor Singh did indeed offer support to such organizations. I was not able to obtain any sort of records (I don't think any were kept) but it was clear that he offered such organizations some money. I accompanied Mor Singh on several trips to events hosted by organizations in which he was the guest of the honor. One such event was the 10th anniversary of an organization that provided education to poor Balmiki children. The event had a very large tent sent up on a street in a lower middle class neighborhood of Delhi. There were food items, loudspeakers, a DJ and banners. Mor Singh was the "chief guest," he was asked to deliver the main address (I too was asked to say a few words!). Another was for the installation of a stone effigy (*murti)* at a new Maharishi Valmiki temple on the outskirts of Delhi. This too was quite a big affair for the locals and Mor Singh was once again the guest of honor. I also once overheard Mor Singh discussing arrangements with the sculptor of another *murti* of Maharishi Valmiki; he

was unhappy because the sculptor had failed to put the saint's iconic pen in the right place. Regardless of the condition of the *murti,* Mor Singh had clearly commissioned it. Like the bandit of Madhya Pradesh, Mohar Singh, Mor Singh of Delhi went to great lengths to cultivate an image of religious benefaction.

Mor Singh tended to frame his stories of good deeds in a narrative of caste struggle. As mentioned, his stories of his own biography and charitable deeds frequently became mixed up with stories of proactive deeds of rescue and leadership. The beneficiaries were often Balmikis but also other Dalits and poor people in general. For example, one of his oft-repeated stories was of something that he did as a teenager. By his own telling, Mor Singh was born to a long lineage of "Sheheri Balmikis" (Prashad 2000, 47), that is *bhangis* or Balmikis who had established themselves in the old Moghul section of the Delhi and were now considerably better off than other members of their caste. He said that his father had been a jeweler and that no one in his family had ever done sanitation work. According to his own narrative about his childhood, he had been friends with the children of an orphanage that was connected to a local aashram. He discovered that the children in that orphanage were being abused. He said that "I had gotten 20 children out from the [orphanage] and supported them." [*"[anathalaya] se 20 bachon ko nikaal diya gaya tha. unko maine rakha*.]. In the following, notice how quickly his personal story slips into one of caste oppression and liberation. [Note: he uses the word English word "torture" to mean "abuse."]

> They were torturing them so I got them out of the ashraam. I supported them. They are 20 kids now. Among them is Madhu Grover, she went to New Zealand, several others I had put in ITC. I was a kid myself. I supported 20 kids at that time. They're all well settled [now]. They're all married. My life has been totally different, separate. We have had a great struggle. The upper castes don't want us to progress. The high caste brothers who gave testimony in the fake case

[against me], they had the police torture us, that which was our power, growthing power [MS's own English phrase], which was inside, they made use of that [i.e., exploited it]. The starting growthing power that was there . . . this was the policy: that which was our power to progress, that ardour that was in our blood, that [is what] they divided . .

The court case he was referring to in this story was his own arrest in the late nineties. He had spent four years in jail on charges of racketeering and extortion. It was this stint in jail that he had mentioned when I first met him, including how he had had people murdered from the jail itself. In my interviews with him, he consistently emphasized the injustices surrounding this case, which may seem odd for someone who had also bragged openly about having people killed from his jail cell but this is actually consistent with his self-image as an avenging hero.

Likewise, when I asked him a general question about discrimination against the Balmiki community, he turned it into a narrative of personal struggle.

Omar: What do you mean by discrimination?
Mor Singh: Discrimination means that we [people like us] would not be able to make progress.
Omar: yes, yes, yes.
Mor Singh: That's true, no? Who would do the cleaning work? Those people of the upper communities, they don't like this. They would prefer that these dalits do cleaning work. Why would they finance us? And those who apply finance, they are not of our community, they are people of the upper community. I got this place for 1 crore 65 lakh, that building which is my office, now I can get ten crore for it . . . it's a historical building.
Mor Singh: About this [building] too, people said that Mor Singh, a Dalit, bought this building! other communities didn't have enough money to buy it [how could he possibly afford it?
So people were jealous.
Omar: Ah, this building . . .
Mor Singh: It cost 1 crore 65 lakh in 1995. Today, it is10 crore.
Omar: Then a little profit came? Those people of the upper community who saw your success and upon seeing your success, did they become jealous?
Mor Singh: They became jealous, they saw which line [i.e., the construction trade] I was moving in, [they said] this line is not for him, we will force him out

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of this. So in order to stop me they leveled a false allegation against me, my brothers, my family.

Similarly, When I asked him a question about the Balmiki community being held back, he transformed it into a question about his own family.

> Omar: So, in the beginning the upper castes tried to obstruct the people of the Valmiki community
> Mor Singh: My brothers, my big brothers, when I was small, I looked at them. When I was big they tried to stop me too. They harassed my brothers. They did nothing. I went and got revenge for them.
> Omar: So, what did you do?
> Mor Singh: I got revenge for them. I opposed it [the oppression] so what did those people do? They filed an illegitimate case against me. The police locked me up. Mor Singh: False offense, they had me caught up in a false offense, a lie, a fake. Understand, not one of my brothers smokes cigarettes, not one of my brothers plays cards, not one drinks alcohol, all of my brothers are good men but still, despite all that, people oppressed them. They called us hoodlums - these guys are hoodlums, they're this, they're that - in the police record for the reason that we are from the dalit community. Today we have as much success as anybody would want.

In a similar vein, he had mentioned how his elder a brother had struggled to become a lawyer but was prevented from getting any success in that field by the upper castes. His experience had convinced Mor Singh that the respectable paths to success were closed and that one had to fight, with violence if necessary.

Munificence as Power Play: Mor Singh's Competing Yatra

I hadn't realized it at our first meeting but Mor Singh's presentation of his greeting card to me was actually a highly political act. The card proclaimed him to be president of the Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav Committee, which is responsible for organizing the main annual procession (*yatra*) in celebration of the saint's birthday. The route traditionally starts at the Red Fort and winds its way to the Valmiki temple on Mandir Marg in New Delhi, where prayers are conducted

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and food is served. It's the major holiday of Delhi's Valmiki community and plays a major

function in bringing the city-wide community together; although smaller processions also occur

throughout the city, the one emanating from the Red Fort is by far the largest and best known. I

hadn't realized either that the scared man from whom I had first heard Mor Singh's name was

also involved in this organization. He had been complaining about how Mor Singh had taken

over the committee.

Mor Singh's desire to take control of the committee and the celebrations of Maharishi

Valmiki's birthday is not hard to understand. By doing so, he would be increasing his name

recognition and changing his reputation from that that of gangster to that of proponent and

defender of good causes. In the time that I spent with Mor Singh, he regularly bragged about a

silver-plated float or *rath* (literally: "chariot") that he had built for the procession and how it

brought honor to the community. Some time later I was told that Mor Singh was running a

competing procession that started in the eastern part of the city and also made its way to the

Mandir Marg temple. His goal though, was not to have a second procession but to get his name

associated with the existing one. At some point before I had met him in 2004, he had apparently

already taken over the committee. I don't know exactly what means he used to effect the

takeover but I know that it was widely disparaged.

The dispute came out in the records of a court case that was filed in 2006 on Mor Singh's

behalf while he was doing a second stint in jail (I will discuss this further below). The Marashi

Valmiki Janmotsav Committee had existed and been conducting the procession from the late

1950s onwards. It is itself governed by the Valmiki Chaudhary Sarpanch Committee, a sort of

council of Balmiki elders that had infighting of its own (Prashad 2000, 154) but was largely seen

as respectable, especially when compared to Mor Singh and his brothers. In 2003, a split

occurred between Mor Singh and the established wing of the organization. In 2003, Mor Singh's

wing of the party attempted to conduct the procession but the old wing, with a considerable

amount of legal effort, was able to block him on grounds of fraud and concealment of material

fact. The following section provides excellent detail regarding the conflict between Mor Singh's

faction and the more traditional one:

> Since counsel on both sides have made detailed submissions regarding justiciability of the permission granted by the respondents to the other side for carrying out the procession tomorrow and the learned standing counsel for the State has taken me through the material considered by the respondents for grant of permission to the group led by Kure Pehalwan to take out the Shobha Yatra, I would like to make a brief mention of the same. The status report filed on behalf of the respondents reveal that the Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav Committee (Regd.) Delhi Pradesh is a traditional society which was registered long back in the year 1957-58. This society has been taking out the procession on the birth anniversary of Maharishi Valmiki every year for last about 50 years. It is contended that till the year 2002, there was no dispute about the taking out of the procession and the dispute arose for the first time in the year 2003 when a suit for injunction (Suit No. 22/2003) was filed by the petitioner before the Civil Judge, Delhi to stake its claim to take out the Shobha Yatra since the respondents in that year had granted permission for taking Shobha Yatra to Shri Uday Singh Chotiwala belonging to the other group. Since the Civil Judge before whom the application for ex-parte stay came for hearing, declined to grant any stay vide order passed on 16.09.2003, the said order was challenged by the petitioner in appeal (Appeal No. 81/2003). During pendency of this appeal, a compromise deed was filed by the petitioner in the aforementioned civil suit stating therein that the other group led by Kure Pehalwan has allowed the petitioner, led by Mohar Singh Pehalwan, to take out the Shobha Yatra and pursuant to that compromise deed, a compromise decree was passed by the civil Court in Suit No. 22/2003 vide decree dated 22.09.2003. This compromise decree was challenged by the other group led by Kure Pehalwan in execution proceedings by way of an application filed under Section 151 read with Order 41 Rule 5 CPC alleging fraud and deception practiced on the Court. The Court taking note of the allegations of fraud and concealment of material fact, stayed the operation of the compromise decree dated

22.09.2003 vide order passed on 09.10.2003 annexed as Annexure-R-2 to the status report. As a consequence of the stay order dated 09.10.2003, the Shobha Yatra was taken out in the year 2003 by the other group led by Kure Pehalwan. The problem to take out Shobha Yatra again arose in the year 2005. Both the groups i.e. group led by the petitioner and the other group led by Kure Pehalwan applied for permission for taking the Shobha Yatra in that year. However, later on the petitioner withdrew its request to take out the Shobha Yatra in favor of the other group and that document has been shown to me by the learned standing counsel for the State from the police record.[20]

The conflict between the Valmiki Chaudhary Sarpanch Committee and the Maharishi Valmiki Sarpanch Committee as taken over by Mor Singh also becomes clear in this judgement. The "old guard," saw Mor Singh as a disreputable criminal and did not want him to seize control. Mor Singh's group attempted to invoke constitutional rights of religious expression but was denied on grounds that this was a criminal matter and the court would have to act in its civil capacity in order to sort the matter out. Although this researcher is not a lawyer and cannot comment with full confidence, the court's logic certainly seems quite hazy and it appears to me that the court was acting arbitrarily on behalf of the police. Mor Singh was indeed trying to leverage his criminally gained power into religious and political power so one can hardly blame the court for taking the actions it did but its faithfulness to legal procedure seems highly questionable.

Becoming a Political Player

It is notable in what I have described above that Mor Singh was not simply handing out cash for support. As Lisa Bjorkman observes, even cash rich politicians cannot simply buy votes. The cash that they distribute must travel through networks of social relationships that involve,

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[20] *ibid*

reciprocity, loyalty and, importantly, *risk* (Björkman 2014, 630). Though the cash itself is clearly fetishized wealth, its actual transmission through the complex dynamics she describes makes it transparently social wealth. Likewise, Raminder Kaur points out that the performance of support of religious processions doesn't guarantee any sort of payoff, it's a risky maneuver embedded in complex social processes (2003, 27, 95). While Mor Singh's wealth was undoubtedly helpful, it was his ability become a big man, a living totem for a group, that made him what he was.

Having political clout when you're a crime leader would have its uses and Mor Singh obviously already had a good amount when I met him. There is no way for me to know exactly how he gained this influence in his early years but it is clear that, by 1996, at the time of his first arrest, he already had some clout as a rally had been organized to protest his detention. It's not hard to guess how he did it. First of all, his family was a Sheheri Balmiki Family, which likely means – again, I can't say for sure – that they had some money and some prestige before the criminal activities ever began. Second, in his youth, Mor Singh had made a name for himself as a wrestler on the local level (he was frequently addressed as Mor Singh *Pehlwan*).[21] Thirdly, I directly observed Mor Singh patronizing the civio-religious life of the community during the course of my fieldwork. These activities gave him fame and prominence within the community. Fourthly, Mor Singh had an apparent talent for hobnobbing with important people. On one of my early excursions with Mor Singh, I accompanied him to a closed-door Congress party event in which Sheila Dixit, then the powerful and popular CM of Delhi was in attendance. He was invited in (I was not allowed); Jai Kishan, then one of four Balmiki MLAs in Delhi's Assembly greeted him warmly and offered him his seat. From the outside, I could see him greeting and

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[21] Recall Hansen's description of Javeed mentioned above. Vijay Prashad also notes that Balmiki's of the early twentieth-century also tended addressed former wrestlers of renown as *pehlwan* (2000, 23).

shaking hands with various Congress officials. On other trips, I also accompanied him as he

visited various other Delhi and New Delhi Congress officials and representatives. I was always

surprised by the deference that they showed toward Mor Singh, offering up their seat to him and

patiently listening to his oratory. However he did it, he had definitely succeeded in amassing

considerable influence with Delhi's political class.

The Big Man Overplays his Hand

There can be no doubt that Mor Singh had clout and power but there can also be no doubt that he

was playing dangerous and difficult game. In 2005 he played the wrong cards and landed

himself in jail once again. In September of that year, an attack against a Balmiki neighborhood

in the city of Gohana, Haryana, (a few hours' drive from Delhi) had occurred. Reacting to a fight

that had occurred between one Balmiki youth and one Jat youth, a mob of Jats burned out the

homes of the Balmiki *basti* (small, impoverished neighborhood).[22] According to Balmiki and

other Dalit sources, the police ranks were heavily populated by Jats and so they allowed the mob

to attack. Just a few days after the incident, Mor Singh organized a hugely successful rally at the

Ram Lila grounds (a large field) in Delhi. The rally was called a Mahapanchayat, or great

council, and it was attended by many regional leaders of the Congress party as well as many

prominent Dalit leaders. Sonia Gandhi even made a video appearance.[23]

The main theme of the rally was that the Congress party, which was in power in both

Haryana and the central government, was not doing enough to protect Dalits and Balmikis in

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[22] "Fire of Aggression" by T.K. Rajalakshmi. *Frontline.* August 23rd, 2005. See also "Arson, Violence Mark Haryana Bandh." *The Hindu.* September 2nd , 2005.
[23] "Dalits Demand Hooda's Dismissal over Gohana Violence." *The Hindu.* September 5th, 2005.

particular. On the day of the Mahapanchayat, a large group of people gathered at Mor Singh's

Darya Ganj office (which had a very large room) and he held court (as usual):

> People should know that in this community there are great, great fighters. But
> fake people who wear kurta pyjama come and do nothing for the community, first
> among them is Jai Kishan (powerful Balmiki MLA). Just now, when the maha
> panchayat hadn't even started, the people came to me in the night, from Hooda's
> (Haryana CM's) place, saying we'll do whatever Mor Singh does [From
> transcriptMor Singh 10].

Just a few days after making these remarks, Mor Singh was arrested again and his triumph was

transformed into tragedy. I am not alleging that his arrest stemmed solely from the remarks

mentioned above but rather from the overall critical tone of his Mahapanchayat. Although Mor

Singh always denied to me and to his followers that he had any interest in running for office, he

was certainly behaving as someone who had such ambitions. Any established Balmiki politician

with any sense of self-preservation would have felt threatened by the events I described above.

My guess is that Mor Singh felt that he would be invincible after such an event, and, having

gotten to know him, I also believe that his displays of passionate anger and perturbation were

probably sincere.

Regardless of who was feeling what, Mor Singh was arrested. Just days after the rally,

Mor Singh was arrested and charged with possession of a stolen vehicle and an illegal firearm.

Mor Singh appealed his arrest but the court denied the appeal. According to the police, Mor

Singh was apprehended in his SUV based on an anonymous tip about his whereabouts. The

police claimed that he pulled gun on them but that they were able to disarm him. They also said

that Mor Singh had no documentation for the vehicle and that it had previously been reported

stolen.[24] The review of Mor Singh's appeal goes on to mention his *alleged* crimes and his "bad

character:"

> This application says that it has been found that the petitioner-Mohar Singh is a
> bad character of police station Darya Ganj, that he is involved in dubious trade of
> extortion, murder, attempt to murder, criminal intimidation, broad daylight killing
> of witnesses who deposed against him with the sole intention of creating panic in
> public so as to enable him to resort to extortion and that he has been operating in
> the form of organized crime syndicate for pecuniary gains. It is further mentioned
> in this application that the Additional Commissioner of Police, Crime Branch, has
> ordered that the accused be taken on police custody remand.[25]

At this point, neither Mor Singh nor his brothers had yet been convicted of any crimes,

although it would have seemed undeniable that Mor Singh was the leader of a criminal

organization. Were these specific allegations true? It's impossible to know but the arrest

did come just days after he had organized an extremely successful Balmiki rally in which

he leveled stinging criticism of Congress party officials. I can also say with certainty that

Mor Singh was not a hard man to find, so it seems very unlikely that the police really

needed an anonymous tip to catch him. Combining this fact with the fact that he had

been a powerful ally of some of the most important Balmiki politicians in Delhi, it must

be the case that Mor Singh's allies had been protecting him up until the time of the

Mahapanchayat but had decided to withdraw that protection because he was turning into

a threat. It is also notable that the court had no qualms about stating Mor Singh's various

alleged crimes as if they were facts even though he had never been convicted of any of

them.

Aside from showing the complexity of the social games that Mor Singh was playing,

these observations underscore the fact that Mor Singh was operating under a weak state that did

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[24] Delhi High Court. Jag Mohan @ Mor Singh v. Commissioner of Police and Others on 1 December, 2006.
[25] *ibid*

not meaningfully have a monopoly on legitimate violence and did not really even follow its own

rules (Hansen 2005b, 228). Mor Singh's social network penetrated the institutions of state power

and so did those of his rivals. Within his network, Mor Singh had been playing the social games

successfully enough to expand and preserve his wealth but he had finally made a bad move and

drawn the personal ire of other powerful individuals. Mor Singh lived in the heterogeneous

realm of the social rather than homogeneous realm of the procedural and, usually, he was able to

make its unpredictable risks work to his advantage – but not this time.

The Group Persists

After Mor Singh's arrest, his allies organized a protest and support rally near Jantar

Mantar in New Delhi. I estimated attendance to be about 200 people at any given time;

many very well known leaders from Delhi's Balmiki community were in attendance.

Although, as one would expect, there were no notable people from the Congress Party.

Among the leaders was Nand Kishore Dilore, a well known activist in Balmiki

circles. His speech, like those of the others was highly laudatory:

> And friends, no one to this day in Dalit history has ever been able to gather this
> many expensive resources this fast, on such short notice that [a large
> demonstration] could be organized within just five days [of the Gohanna
> incident]. Sathiyon ne us bat ko underline kiya hai. [My companions have
> underlined this point. Before this, doubtlessly before the emergency, on the Ram
> Lila Ground, when Sardar Buta Singh [a well known Balmiki Politician] was the
> rail minister, the whole railway department was poured into making the rally
> successful. The message was sent to every city and municipality that Sanjay
> Gandhi was to address the rally . . . our boss is coming, our master is coming;
> who ever does not come to the rally would be marked absent . . . and he who
> come is marked present. With whatever manner the law was shredded up and the
> government machinery misused and despite this they had difficulty getting 20 to
> 25 thousand people to show up to the rally. . .The person whose voice gathered
> hundreds of thousands of youth from Hindustan, without concern for any of his
> own gains or losses, who could stand up and lead a disciplined rally. . .

The speaker was referencing a rally that occurred in the seventies as part of the JP movement.[26] Buta Singh had served as a Member of Parliament from the early sixties and for most that time had been the only Balmiki MP. He was still a very important figure in Indian politics (he would later be considered for President) and was strongly associated with the Congress party establishment. To trumpet Mor Singh's accomplishments over those of Buta Singh was a daring move but it was done with great embellishment. These words were met with great approval as was much of the other obsequious, hyperbolic rhetoric at the rally.

All of this hyperbole has to be understood as part of a social game of exaggeration. Everyone takes the literal words with a grain of salt, but players score metaphorical points in the game by showing their willingness to engage in the hyperbole on behalf the group's living totem. Given that Mor Singh had just been arrested and was at odds with the dominant Congress party, exaggerated expressions of loyalty carried at least some level of risk. Another risk-taking speaker was the *purohit* of the main Balmiki Temple on Mandir Marg in Delhi, a very mainstream figure within the community. He said:

> This September 5th rally happened, its success happened . . . the bad consequence of which is the suffering of our friend, our patron, our ally, Mor Singh Pehlwan. . . Friends, after the arrest of Mor Singh Pehlwan, what did Delhi police DCP so and so Singh Luthra say? That this person is very dangerous, he is dangerous for the atmosphere of Delhi, "He is a threat to society." This is *his* opinion . . . You are calling the person who organized this highly disciplined of a rally [the Mahapanchayat] a "threat to society?"

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[26] The JP Movement opposed Indira Gandhi's imposition of emergency powers in the seventies. It was named after its national leader, Jayarakash Narayan. See *In the Name of Democracy* by Bipin Chandra (2017) for details.

He goes on to refer to an incident in which the Delhi police were accused of raping a young woman and proclaiming how it was the police themselves who were the threat to society. This was another risky move in a city that was thoroughly dominated by the Congress party.

Some months after his arrest, Mor Singh's supporters also attempted to conduct the competing Maharishi Valmiki Jayanti procession again, even though Mor Singh himself was still in jail. This time it was the police who stopped them from doing so. In the following record of the case, the respondents are the Commissioner of Police while the petitioner is the Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav Committee as controlled by Mor Singh through one of his associates, Sanjay Kamwal.

> the respondents have filed a status report inter-alia stating that the request of Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav Committee (Regd.) Delhi Pradesh received through its Secretary Mr. Sanjay Kamwal for taking out Grand Shobha Yatra on 07.10.2006 on the auspicious occasion of birth anniversary of Maharishi Valmiki has been considered but could not be acceded to as he is affiliated to Mohar Singh Pehalwan and his four brothers namely Brij Mohan, Sher Singh, Jai Chand and Khoob Singh who all are notorious criminals.[27]

Once again the criminal *reputation* of Mor Singh and his brothers – what was essentially hearsay – was enough for the police to block the procession from taking place and enough the for the courts to uphold that decision.

Mor Singh also attempted to make the case that the Janmotsav Committee was the traditional and therefore legitimate convener of the procession. Because so many groups want to hold processions in the city, there are guidelines specifying that groups that have not been conducting processions for the preceding three years have to go through a special application process. Mor Singh's group argued that the Janmotsav Committee had been conducting the

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[27] Delhi High Court. Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav . . . vs Commissioner Of Police And Ors. on 6 October, 2006

parade for decades and that, if the Police granted the organization under his presidency the right to conduct the parade in 2001 and 2002, then why not in 2006? The court responded by essentially arguing that the Janmotsav Committee was subordinate to the Sarpanch Committee and thus that the Police were only objecting because that organization was objecting. No precedent is mentioned for choosing a superior body over a subordinate body even though the latter was officially registered organizer of the procession and so the legal logic in the judgment seems quite fuzzy. The following passage is however quite revealing:

> As per status report, the petitioner had made a request for permission to take out Shobha Yatra on 07.10.2003 through Mr. Sanjay Kamwal who is associated to Mohar Singh Pehalwan, a notorious criminal. The said Mohar Singh Pehalwan is booked in several criminal cases including . . . [28]

And it goes on to list the numerous cases we've already discussed, none of which had yet resulted in a conviction for either Mor Singh or his brothers. More notably, the actual organizer of the event, Sanjay Kanwal, was not implicated in the case but is merely declared to be an associate of Mor Singh, "a notorious criminal." Keeping in mind that the competing procession had been occurring for several years and that the court was only stopping it after Mor Singh had sharply criticized Congress politicians at the Mahapanchayat, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the decision was influenced by people within the Congress Party. This is of course how Mor Singh and his supporters saw the situation but, if this conclusion is correct, then Mor Singh was dealing not with impersonal legal procedure but with very personal retaliations by other powerful people.

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[28] Delhi High Court. Maharishi Valmiki Janmotsav . . . vs Commissioner Of Police And Ors. on 6 October, 2006

Mor Singh as Living Totem

What became apparent from this rally as well from the other post-arrest expressions of support was that they had a strongly performative element. The people within Mor Singh's group of followers almost always seemed to be competing with one another to articulate their support with ever more obsequious and risky hyperbole. The fact that these expressions were very public and the fact that the support persisted after his arrest shows that there was more to this relationship than just quid-pro-quo patronage. We might contrast the social dynamics of Mor Singh with those of the Illinois state politician, Mike Madigan. The latter promoted the image of himself as a by-the-book politician even though he had long been suspected of corruption. Madigan was eventually caught doing lucrative political favors for a utility company and other businesses in exchange for their patronage of his personal law firm and their provision of ghost jobs to his supporters (Sfondeles 2020; Rose 2022). The exchanges were all discussed privately and with elaborate euphemisms, indicating that he was trying to keep a low profile. Michael Madigan's name or presence did not have any special symbolic value for a community;[29] he was simply a powerful person with whom lucrative deals could be made. Mor Singh, by contrast, strenuously advertised his illegal activities as well his cavalier generosity.

It is because his relationship with his followers is more than just a *quid pro quo* arrangement that I argue that Mor Singh served as an emblem or a living totem for his group of followers. In making this claim, I do not wish to open up a lengthy discussion about theories of the totem. Rather, I hope to capture the spirit of Durkheim's insight that groups constitute themselves through collective representations; they make themselves into groups in the very

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[29] I have not encountered any mentions of such symbolic value in the coverage of his case.

same process that they collectively display or venerate the emblem. The totem, in Durkheim's theory, exerts pressure on group members through a reciprocally (or structurally) causal dynamic in which the group exists because they are united in their acceptance of the normative power of the totem and the totem has normative power because the group is united in the acceptance of said power.

Unlike a totemic image of an animal or a plant, Mor Singh is a flesh and blood human who is capable of dispensing real patronage, real favors and real violence. An image cannot order your death from a jail cell! However, the fact that Mor Singh has to *order* your death, meaning, he has to get other people to perform the act and that those people have to feel compelled to do so already shows us that his power is a *social fact*. Moreover, Mor Singh had a power that brought people out to rallies even though he was a self-professed crime leader. Mor Singh's followers were united in their acceptance of Mor Singh's power and Mor Singh had power because his followers were united in the acceptance of his power.

Conclusion

What I have tried to show in this chapter is (a) that Mor Singh fits Marshall Sahlins' classic description of a big man almost perfectly and (b) that he served as a living totem for his supporters. But I also hope to have demonstrated something beyond these two points: that the very fact of their appropriateness demonstrates the transparently social nature of Mor Singh's wealth. The fact that these two sociological/anthropological theories describe the social dynamics surrounding Mor Singh means that "his" material wealth cannot be disaggregated from the social relationships within his community. Indeed the same can be said of many people in his

social network (to varying degrees). They are all nodes in the network of relationships through which the material wealth flows. As the "center-man," Mor Singh is the largest and most central of the nodes but he too is just a node. His wealth is thus thoroughly embedded in his personal social relationships and, importantly for our purposes, it is experienced as such and can thus be considered a transparently social form of wealth.

Outwardly, Mor Singh appeared to have a lot of commodity wealth. He owned a large building in a very expensive part of town, he had a silver plated *rath* (float) for parades, he funded Balmiki temples and shrines around the greater Delhi area, subsidized union activities and funded on-profits. Yet it is quite unclear how much property he actually owned in a legal sense. Many of the buildings and vehicles that he and his brothers used were either stolen or just occupied by brute force. He even forcefully took regular meals from a restaurant. The same could be said of his money, which would undoubtedly be seized as stolen property were he to be convicted. For these reasons, it can be fairly said that Mor Singh's control over his assets was only as good as the highly personal social relationships that allowed him to maintain such control. Add to this the fact that his personal lifestyle was nary ascetic and we are left with the impression of someone who is poor in commodity wealth but rich in social resources.

These resources are central to the criminal aspect of Mor Singh's activities. Loan sharking, extorting money, occupying homes, stealing cars and the like are all things that require not only accomplices but an image of impunity. As we have seen, Mor Singh cultivates a criminal image and he is very well known to the police. The latter were refraining from arresting him because of his political influence and connections, both of which had been garnered through his reciprocity networks and carefully crafted Robin Hood image within the Balmiki

Community. Mor Singh could not be the big man he is through a single bank robbery; he had to have criminal enterprises that yielded funds year in and year out. His ability to keep these enterprises going came from his ability to successfully play the social games of charisma, loyalty, obligation, munificence, respect, etc. But the sincere and passionate Mor Singh was not a solitary criminal mastermind. The other people in those relationships were playing those games just as much as he was and they needed him (or someone) to occupy the central node. All of these social games were, in turn, part of other processes of caste cohesion, kinship, marriage, loyalty, honor, esteem, virtue and many other aspects of social life. All of these were woven together in a complex social tapestry, of which only one thread was formed by the physical items that would otherwise constitute commodity wealth.

As mentioned, the activities of Mor Singh and his other associates would be seen by most economists and political scientists as textbook examples of rent-extractive and rent-seeking behaviors. The ethnographic evidence presented in this chapter supports one of the secondary arguments of this dissertation: that the types of activities that garner those descriptions are usually those of transparently social wealth. I will offer a more complete rebuttal of the economist's notion of rent in Chapter 6.

Had his followers been merely looking for commodity wealth, the group surrounding Mor Singh would not have survived his multiple arrests and setbacks. But the group had survived for decades before his 2005 arrest and it endures until this day, albeit in a diminished form. Mor Singh was released from Tihar Jail in 2015 and continues to have a presence in Balmiki politics. One can even find Youtube videos of him speaking publicly and greeting politicians. There is no doubt that the members of this group are looking for some kind of

wealth but it is also clear that they are looking for something more than just the quantifiable gains of commodity wealth. This is not surprising given that the social dynamics that surround Mor Singh exist in the prevailing conditions of expropriated freedom. Much like those who engage in practices of proprietary livelihood, Mor Singh's followers are drawn into the community because they would otherwise face a bleak landscape of poverty and insecurity. Under the combined conditions of expropriated freedom and weak statehood, the poor and the marginalized would find the transparently social processes that come from joining a big man's faction to be an extremely appealing method of accumulating and preserving wealth for themselves.

Practices of transparently social wealth such as these undermine the bourgeois-capitalist order. The world of commodity wealth depends on bourgeois rules of ownership and exchange. This world also requires a state – *the* state – that enforces such rules impersonally through legal-bureaucratic procedure. This requirement necessitates in turn that people don't directly experience the sociality of the state beyond momentary contacts (the receipt of a speeding ticket, the signing of a title transfer, etc). It is important to note that Mor Singh's operations did not really come into conflict with *the* state in this sense of the term. Rather, Mor Singh's social games put him into personal conflict with individual members of the Delhi Government who were themselves participating in the social games as much as he was. The forces that undid him were not the procedural machinations of a modern state but rather the retaliations from offended individuals who happened to be members of the government. Because the state is weak, it is not the main force stamping out transparently social wealth. In the next chapter, we will examine

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several cases in which upper middle class homeowner associations attempted to combat

transparently social wealth.

Chapter 5
Neoliberalism Against Transparently Social Wealth: Neighborhood Sanitation and the Disciplining of Labor in Delhi

I. Introduction

In the previous chapters, I described a few ways in which transparently social wealth played an important role in the lives of sanitation workers and in the life of Delhi's Balmiki community more generally. In the practices of proprietary livelihood that I described in Chapter 2, the Balmikis were repurposing new versions of the old Indian *jajmani* and *birat* systems, something that I discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. In the case of the organized crime leader that I discussed in Chapter 4, the Balmiki community was organizing itself around a big man whose *modus operandi* is not at all unique to the traditions of the subcontinent. What I have tried to establish thus far is that transparently social wealth, whether it has the guise of "tradition" or not, is always a threat to the "rule of equivalence"[1] and to the homogeneity of state sovereignty.

I have also tried to show that the state in Delhi is not consistently interested in or capable of taking on this threat. As a relatively weak state, it is itself interpenetrated with the practices of transparently social wealth, especially in the domain of the formal *safai karamcharis*. With regard to the proprietary livelihood practices of the informal garbage collectors, the state was largely unaware of their methods and, thus, unable to challenge them. In this chapter, I will

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[1] The phrase comes from David Held's analysis of Critical Theory. It describes the parallel form of the world of commodities and the domination of instrumental reason (Held 1980 p.66,86).

describe several cases in which upper middle class homeowner associations became frustrated with the Delhi government's apparent inability to improve the sanitary conditions of their neighborhoods and then tried to bring the various categories of sanitation workers under their control.

As described in Chapter 2, Delhi's formal and informal sanitation systems were heavily shaped by the practices of transparently social wealth, especially those that I have labeled as proprietary livelihood. Because of this fact, practically all the residents of Delhi were affected by these worker-protecting practices. In the early 2000s, however, very few residents seemed terribly concerned about them. I believe this because such practices were so deeply woven into the everyday lives of so many Indians that they went unquestioned. Many people were involved in their own versions of transparently social wealth and so they just assumed that others were too. Some people were undoubtedly just resigned or unaware. Whatever its cause, tolerance of these practices was not appreciated by Delhi's upper-middle class homeowners.

Many of Delhi's more tony neighborhoods had organizations that were known as Resident Welfare Associations. These were essentially homeowner associations that were recognized by the city government and were granted authority to manage neighborhood affairs and advocate for the neighborhood to municipal authorities. Sanitation was one of their major concerns and they were finding that it was very difficult to the control the various sanitation workers of their neighborhoods. As we saw in Chapter 2, the proprietary livelihood practices of both the formal and the informal sanitation workers gave them a lot of autonomy over their own working conditions. While the members of the RWAs were unaware of proprietary livelihood,

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they were sure that the workers' autonomy was getting in the way of their ambitions for cleaner neighborhoods.

In this chapter, I will chronicle the ways in which several RWAs tried to wrest control of their local sanitation systems from the existing sanitation workers (nearly all of whom belonged to the Balmiki Community). I will argue that their desire to do this came primarily from a "cleanliness envy" of the wealthier cities of the Global North. These upper middle-class desires existed in a context of global neoliberalism: the Delhi government of the early 2000s had stated ambitions to make Delhi a "world class" city (see: McGuire 2016), and these ambitions were to be executed in part through policies that encouraged local citizens to monitor and intervene in certain government functions (see: Anantharaman 2023). I will argue that the conscious desires to turn Delhi into a world class city and to make neighborhoods "clean and green" are simultaneously unconscious desires to replace the transparently social nature of proprietary livelihood with modern/capitalist labor discipline. To state the argument in other terms, the RWAs are trying to separate the sanitation workers from their social positions and thrust them into a state of expropriated freedom. I will end the chapter with some reflections on the class dimension of sanitation politics in turn-of-the-century Delhi and on on the meanings of the adjectives "bourgeois" and "subaltern."

Nongovernmental Governance

With the aim of hosting the Commonwealth Games, Delhi's Chief Minister Sheila Dixit ambitiously proclaimed in 2006: "By 2010, we will turn Delhi into a dream city – clean, beautiful, green and world-class (Goyal 2006)." Indeed, the dynamic Chief Minister of Delhi,

who was first elected in 1998, had overseen major changes in Delhi's urban and economic landscape, including construction of the world's largest natural gas transportation system, the privatization of electricity and water, the removal of zone-violating industrial units, the cleaning up of the Yamuna River,[23] and, most spectacularly, the construction of a sleek, new commuter rail system. Even more than the other projects, the latter mimicked in its ambition successful Asian cities like Seoul and Singapore. Following in the footsteps of other high profile (and hi-tech) leaders like Andhra Pradesh's Chandrababu Naidu (Reddy 2002) and Madhya Pradesh's Digvigay Singh (Behar 2003; Manor 2001), Dixit presented herself as one of a new breed of politicians—honest, efficient, market-friendly and craving global recognition. She represented "the new India," the India that gave priority to smooth running government, that had faith in the power of competition, and that avoided expensive, patronage-driven social justice measures. Decentralization, participation, transparency and efficiency were the watchwords of this new form of governance (Dixit 2004; Jha and Mathur 1999; Sethi 2006).

As her above proclamation indicates, *cleanliness* was of top priority to the image of the "new" Delhi that Dixit wanted to present to the world. In proper neoliberal form, various forms of public-private partnerships were initiated to improve Delhi's sanitary infrastructure. Partial privatization of the sanitation system was initiated in 2002, although, much to the ire of the city's

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[2] In 2002, the Dixit government initiated an environmental and sanitation awareness program (see: http://delhigovt.nic.in/environment.asp#1) and then in 2004 it began the similar "Clean Delhi Campaign" (*The Hindu* (online edition), "Clean Delhi Campaign Launched," July 6th, 2004). Although voters as a whole did not share Dixit's concern for cleanliness in the 2003 election (Kumar,Joshi, and Datar 2004), the fact that RWA members did illustrates the class character of the issue.

[3] In 2002, the Dixit government initiated an environmental and sanitation awareness program (see: http://delhigovt.nic.in/environment.asp#1) and then in 2004 it began the similar "Clean Delhi Campaign" (*The Hindu* (online edition), "Clean Delhi Campaign Launched," July 6th, 2004). Although voters as a whole did not share Dixit's concern for cleanliness in the 2003 election (Kumar,Joshi, and Datar 2004), the fact that RWA members did illustrates the class character of the issue.

upper middle classes, total transfer to for-profit contractors had been blocked by Delhi's

powerful sanitation worker's unions and their allies in Dixit's own own Congress party.   As we

know from Chapters 2 and 4, the SK unions were involved in deep networks of proprietary

livelihood and other forms of transparently social wealth that were fused with caste politics and

organized crime. A good portion of the effort to improve sanitation and governance in general

was also entrusted to local, non-governmental organizations such as RWAs, who were granted

more autonomy as institutions of urban governance under an initiative known as known as the

Bhagidari program.

"Bhagidhari" can be translated as either "participation" or "collaborative partnership"

and the Bhagidari program, which was instituted by Dixit's government in 1998, was meant to

encourage citizen involvement in government affairs (Gaurav and Singhal 2003) by forcing

certain bodies, such as the Delhi Development Authority and Municipal Corporation of Delhi, to

consult with local neighborhood and trade associations when initiating construction and

infrastructural projects. The government also invites "bhagidars" (participants) to various

workshops on city affairs, thereby providing them visibility and at least some influence.

Moreover, Resident Welfare Associations, Merchant and Traders Associations and various NGOs

could and did make use of the recent Freedom of Information Act to act as "watch dog"

organizations. While their powers remained largely symbolic, the new role of the RWAs did

allow them to function as a forum for homeowner protest and as managers of some local affairs.

Most RWA activists think that the government merely pays them lip service, agreeing

with Mr. V.C. Tandon that Bhagidari is "a good idea, but has not worked in practice."

Overlooked in this criticism, however, is the extent to which RWAs have succeeded in taking

some tasks of governing into their own hands. Registered under the Societies Registration Act (1860), RWAs are not formally different than any other NGO except that they are territory-based and each RWA is granted exclusive rights to represent a given neighborhood. Although membership in the RWA is strictly voluntary, their monopoly character allows them to function as parastatal institutions. It is the RWAs, for example, that have been responsible for transforming Delhi's residential "colonies" into what are essentially gated communities with limited entry points guarded by private security personnel. The RWAs aren't only trying to keep criminals out, however. In contrast to their American counterparts (see Low 2003), the RWAs understand themselves to be on a mission to inculcate local residents and workers with the values of good citizenship.

I was able to observe RWAs in action in the Fall of 2005 at a meeting in south Delhi in which plans to privatize water provision and garbage removal were reviewed and judged not to be in the citizen's favor. Recognizing that the RWAs "have no teeth," Mr. Tandon united the associations into a "Joint Front." Under the banner of the Joint Front, they had been able to take relatively effective action, as for example they did in getting power price increases revoked and in impeding the progress of water privatization. The sight of retired bureaucrats and engineers taking to the streets over kilowatt hours garnered them some ridicule in the press, but it also established them as a significant significant force in municipal politics. In an era of "new management" theories that expect governments to behave like corporations, the RWAs have flourished as the voice of affluent customers.

Neoliberalism against Transparently Social Wealth

I will demonstrate that the RWAs, in conjunction with other non-governmental organizations, found resonance in neoliberal ideas not because of an ethical or theoretical commitment to the principles of *laissez faire* economics but rather to the systematization of sanitation. The RWA members were unaware of proprietary livelihood and the other practices of transparently social wealth that were at work in their neighborhoods. They thought that sanitation services were simply haphazard and disordered. For them, neoliberal policies were a way of bringing rules to a situation that they perceived to be rule-less.

Neoliberal ideology in the Global North largely sought to reduce the number of rules to which economic actors were subjected. The arrival of neoliberal policies in the late twentieth century was part of a broader set of transitions variously understood as the shift from the modern to the postmodern (Jameson 1991), the industrial to the postindustrial (Bell 1973), the organized to the unorganized (Lash and Urry 1987), the centralized to the networked (Castells 1996), and the rigid to the flexible (Harvey 1989). Consistent with these epochal transformations, neoliberalism glorified the individual anan an innovative subject that flourished when it was liberated from overbearing rules and regulations. Ronald Reagan iconically captured the spirit of this individual in a 1981 speech: "Only when the human spirit is allowed to invent and create . . . only then can societies remain economically alive, dynamic, progressive, and free. Trust the people. This is the one irrefutable lesson of the entire postwar period contradicting the notion that rigid government controls are essential to economic development.[4]" While both neoliberalism and its extremist cousin, libertarianism, accepted that the rule of law is crucial to

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[4] See: "Quotation of the Day on the 'Magic of the Marketplace" by Mark J. Perry. The American Enterprise Institute. Accessed on 6/25/2024. https://www.aei.org/carpe-diem/quotation-of-the-day-on-the-magic-of-the-marketplace/

the functioning of the market, both also agreed that the purview of the state should be strictly limited to the protection of basic (negative) rights and the enforcement of contracts (Friedman and Friedman 1982; Hayek 1944; Nozick 1974). Any extension of rules and regulations beyond the minimal requirements of "disciplinary individualism[5]," they argued, would dampen the creative productivity of innovatinging geniouses and hence restrain the productive capacity of the market (Friedman and Friedman 1982 p.4). The neoliberalism of the West thus sought to emancipate the individual from excessive rules.

The RWAs, by contrast, sought to implement rules in a situation that they perceived to be chaotic. They included some of their own neighbors among the rule-breakers but they could do little more than use their minimal soft-power against them. They regarded the formal sanitation workers also to be major violators of the rules because they simply didn't do their jobs; their power over this group of workers had to be exercised through the municipal corporation and was thus slow and limited. They regarded the informal garbage collectors as being a problem not because they didn't do their jobs but because they did them in such a way that they actually worsened sanitary conditions. What the RWA members did not know was that they were bumping up against the walls of proprietary livelihood. As we have seen, it's not that the sanitation workers did not have any rules, it's just that they didn't have the "bourgeois modern" (Chakrabarty 2002) rules favored by upper middle-class residents. More specifically, they did not follow the spatial divisions of public/private space that are integral to modern life and to life and to systems of sanitation in particularin particular (Chakrabarty 2002).

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[5] "Disciplinary individualism" is a term widely used by Foucauldians to gloss his argument that modern individuals are made in and through disciplinary processes. The earliest use of the term of which I am aware is by Mark Seltzer in *Bodies and Machines* (Seltzer 1992, 18).

To make the informal garbage collectors conform to their rules, the RWAs needed to find a disciplinary mechanism. The mechanism they chose was that of hiring and firing workers or, in other words, of taking away their proprietary livelihood and turning them into wage laborers. What this suggests, however, is that rather than using the neoliberal framework to reduce the number of rules to its disciplinary minimum, they were trying to increase the number of rules *to* that minimum. They were, in a sense, trying to get the sanitation workers to identify with what William H. Whyte once called "organization man" (Whyte 1956) – a good citizen and good worker who gladly inserted him or herself into a framework of regulations. To put it another way, rTo put it another way, rationalization through proletarianization was their goal.

If, as I am arguing, neoliberal ideology was being put to use to combat transparently social wealth, then this would suggest that the narrative surrounding neoliberalism needs to be shifted. The conventional narrative of neoliberal ideology in India tends to follow the same the plot arc as its metropolitan counterpart. That is to say, it considers neoliberal ideology to be intervening into socialist or welfarist states that encouraged "organization man" and "social citizenship." Analyses of Indian political economy (Chibber 2003; Corbridge and Harriss 2000) tend to present a narrative in which India essentially forgets the society that it "discovered" earlier in the century. According to these narratives, the Nehruvian project of central planning and democratic socialism fragmented in favor of private citizens and private capital in much the same way as the welfare states of more industrialized countries (Esping-Andersen 1999; O'Brien and Penna 1998). Along similar lines, some anthropologists and cultural analysts argued that Indians are increasingly becoming "consumer-citizens" (Breckenridge 1995; see also Deshpande

1993; Lukose 2005), implying that average Indians used to be social citizens in an organized economy.

What this narrative overlooks is that, even in the early twenty-first century, well over 50% of the Indian economy was in the informal sector.[6]   More to the point, much of the formal sector of the economy, both its public and private sides, was being *dis*organized by rent-seekers taking advantage of the weakness of the state (Bardhan 2007). These facts help explain that the evil targeted by neoliberal discourses in India was not primarily big government's constraint on individuals created by socialist/welfarist policies but the freedom it gave *some* individuals to violate rules and regulations with impunity. For many Indians, the primary problem with the officious "permit-raj" that characterized the post-Independence social-democratic state was not rigidity, but the fact that it allowed politicians and bureaucrats to be too flexible; the excessive power given to government functionaries (Bardhan 2001) had made each and every one of them a petty demi-sovereign, ready to declare a state of exception for the right price or the mention of the right name. Occurring in this context of quotidian lawlessness, the "retreat of the state" in India pitched itself against a different sort of enemy than it did in the West. Its policy prescriptionsIn the local context of the RWAs, this meant that the spirit of neoliberalism was different than what we would otherwise expect. It aimed itself at implementing rules in areas where they didn't exist, at increasing compliance to those rules and, perhaps most importantly, at getting the state to follow its own rules. In this sense the RWAs unconscious fight against transparently social wealth was an attempt to assert a sovereignty from the middle.

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[6] See: "Measuring the informal economy in India" by S.V. Ramana Murthy. Paper presented at the 7th Statistics Forum of the International Monetary Fund, 2019. Accesssed December 11th, 2023. https://www.imf.org/-/media/Files/Conferences/2019/7th-statistics-forum/session-ii-murthy.ashx.

II. The RWAs Challenge Transparently Social Wealth in Defence Colony

By 2005, several Resident Welfare Associations were attempting to directly employ the the door-to-door garbage collectors and ragpickers of their neighborhoods. As we saw in Chapter 2, these workers had organized themselves in a guild-like system in which they owned their client lists and were thus self-employed and highly independent. These RWAs had begun encouraging what they called a culture of "hire and fire." That is, a culture in which workers were fined or dismissed for transgressing the rules and regulations stipulated by the association. In this section, I will begin by relaying my observations of the Defence Colony RWA and its garbage collectors in order to illustrate in detail the more general pattern of RWA intervention that I found. I will show that they were attempting to rationalize the sanitation systems of their neighborhoods by proletarianizing the existing workforce. This was a workforce that, as we have seen, was engaged in practices of practices of proprietary livelihood asas well as other practices of transparently social wealth.

Originally built for officers of the military, Defence Colony had become one of Delhi's most upscale neighborhoods and it was also the temporary home of many foreigners from various parts of the Global North. I myself had lived there off and on for many months at a time. Many of its residents had either themselves been abroad or had relatives who had spent significant periods abroad as students or workers. Well before I started this project I had heard complaints from landlords and shopkeepers about the dirt and disorder of Defence Colony and the city in general. The complaints usually took the form of "Delhi must seem so dirty to you?" Negative comparisons to Singapore were also frequently made. Cleanliness-envy was rampant.

One notable theme of the middle-class complaints about the sanitation system was that personal relationships were needed to make anything happen.   The supposedly inadequate work of the municipal *safai karamcharis* always lay in the background of any conversation about sanitation. When complaining about the municipal workers, Mrs. Chowdhury, an RWA activist from Defence Colony, immediately made an exception: "the lady who sweeps my lane is okay but that is because I have been friendly to her . . . otherwise they don't do a thing . . ." To get the general, reliable and impersonal cleanliness that they wanted they had to rationalize their local sanitation system.

At my first observation of a meeting of the RWA's sanitation committee, it became clear that rationalization and control were central ambitions. At this first observation, I met Mrs. Chowdhury who was sitting at her desk under a tree behind the ruin of a small Mughal tomb, making careful entries in a large ledger. She and her fellow resident, Mr. Arora, resembled nineteenth century colonial administratorss conducting government affairs (or, at least, theythey resembled the Merchant and Ivory depiction of such figuress!). Like her colonial counterparts, she considered her volunteer work for her Resident Welfare Association to be a kind a civilizing mission. Like the other RWA members, she was a homeowner in the colony. Sitting on the ground before her were a group of male and female garbage collectors, who all wore plastic photo-ID cards around their necks so that they could be recognized as RWA-approved garbage collectors while conducting their work. The scene was striking to me because I knew how different this scenario was from garbage collectors' normal manner of working.

At that moment, she was taking attendance, which would seem like very routine task, but it was not because several of the workers on the list had sent a relative to substitute for them.

After taking attendance, she began the unenviable job of informing the garbage collectors of complaints lodged against them by the residents. Someone had not cleaned the area behind the house, someone else had left a plasticplastic bag by the front door, another person had apparently not shown up at all. One worker was receiving his fifth complaint and so he would receive a fine. If he were to get ten complaints, he could get fired. The very possibility of being fired marked a radical change from the old old relationships of proprietary livelihood.

Mrs. Chowdhury, and a colleague sat on chairs behind a desk in the yard behind the RWA's office. The workers, meanwhile, sat on the grass. In a book with a separate page for each "boy," Mrs. Chowdhury recorded the complaints lodged against them by the residents. Mrs. Chowdhury told me that she attempts to evaluate whether the resident or the worker is in the right, but "it is usually the resident who is correct because, at end of the day, [the workers] are slipshod." Although one man was quite severely scolded and fined while I was there, Mrs.Chowdhury informed me that they are actually fairly lenient with the rules. She says: "there is only so much you can fine them, because, at the end of the day, they can't afford it." They had never actually fired anyone because the workers depended on this work to run their families and the RWA members didn't have the heart to terminate workers as often as the rules stipulated.

As we saw in Chapter 2, informal garbage collectors usually had monopoly rights over a client list. These rights had no governmental validity but were recognized and enforced by other garbage collectors, who were overwhelmingly members of the Balmiki caste community. The fact that they had to attend meetings and could be fined or fired was a major change in their working relationships although, as we shall see, this change was not quite as dramatic as it first appeared.

"Neat and Clean"

The Orientalists within us might be tempted to see the RWAs' concern for the cleanliness of their neighborhoods as one that stems from a Hindu cosmology of purity and pollution, but this is not the case. On the contrary, the RWAs have chosen a side in what Dipesh Chakrabarty has called the "the battle of the bourgeois moderns versus the subaltern citizens" (Chakrabarty 2002, 78). The bourgeois moderns, according to Chakrabarty, arrange their spatial practices according to a private/public dichotomy, where the latter space is *owned* by the collective body of citizens. The subalterns, on the other hand, organize their spatial practices according to an inside/outside dichotomy, where the "outside" space is not owned by anyone and can thus serve as the repository for the dirty and disgusting (Chakrabarty 2002, p. 69).[7]

Having picked their side, the RWAs are quite consciously and actively mobilized against spatial practices that treat one's own home as an "inside" to be kept clean and the streets, parks, and markets as an "outside" in which one can freely dump waste. Mrs. Chowdhury of the Defence Colony RWA made this clear to me:

> If I may be totally frank, [the cleanliness problem] stems from the core of the people living here. They're not trained to keep clean. Their own house may be beautiful with pure white marble and all but they don't keep the road in front of their house clean. They put all the dirt outside the house. People have no sense of how to keep the public areas clean and they don't care about it either. That mindset will come slowly as we develop.

Mrs.Chowdhury's attitude is unabashedly bourgeois and bourgeois and modern. She does not try to portray her efforts to get the neighborhood clean in any kind of traditional idiom. Nor would she have any cause to do so; the sort of cleanliness she wants is undeniably modern. She is

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[7] Please see my discussion of this topic in the introduction to this dissertation.

advocating a spatial practice that divides private property from public property along bourgeois

modern lines, lines that treat public property as belonging to everyone rather no one.

It is difficult to generalize about how Balmikis in general or sanitation or sanitation

workers moremore specifically organize their spatial practices and so I will avoid doing so.

However, I did see inside/outside spatial practices at work in Sangam Park, a neighborhood that

was overwhelmingly populated by Balmikis and Balmikis and sanitation workers. Although the

neighborhood had been originally built as a planned community for *safai karamcharis* with 4-

story apartment blocks, wide streets, parks and dumpsters, the Balmiki residents had transformed

it with their own spatial practices (see Chapter 1). Much refuse was simply tossed out onto the

street or into piles on the street that served as impromptu dumpsters. This refuse was often eaten

by pigs, goats, and cows but would also be cleaned up the *safai karamcharis* who worked that

neighborhood. Sporadic clean-up events were also occasionally were also occasionally

organized by the residents. Aside from the streets, the alleys between the buildings also became

dumpsites. I remember many a night in which we just threw our chicken bones out the window,

down four stories into the alleys. When I questioned my friends about this habit, they shrugged

and said that the pigs would eat the scraps. And, indeed, the alleys were very popular with the

pigs. There was some etiquette regarding where exactly and how much garbage people would

dump at any given time, but, on the whole, it was acceptable to toss garbage into the streets and

alleys. Those spaces were, in other words, treated as "outside" spaces that were unowned and

thus acceptable receptacles for unwanted objects.

Disorder in the public space was a widespread concern among RWA members. "When I

come home from work, I don't want to have to see garbage everywhere," a member of the

Panchsheel Enclave RWA told me. As in all such interviews, I pushed him with questions about exactly why local community organizations should be concerned with the problem of dirt. "Is it because of the sanitation issue, because dirt spreads disease," I asked, hoping to find an answer that had some "material" consequence. "It's not only that it spreads disease, it doesn't look nice also. We want our colony to be neat and clean." "Neat and clean" is one of many alliterative phrases that pervade Indian English and render obvious to all involved just how blurry the line between ordinary speech and sloganeering actually is. I first noticed the phrase while generically discussing life in America with random interlocutors in Delhi. "How is it over there?" people would ask, "Everything neat and clean?" The referent of the phrase was always notably imprecise, sliding from everyday order and cleanliness to the developmental status of entire nations.

The power of "neat and clean" lies in its very banality. Like "democracy," "justice," "development," "nation," etc., "neat and clean" operates as an ideological anchor that overflows with enough emotional power that it needs no further explanation and at the same time guarantees the meaning of a range of local political actions. But unlike grand ideologies, this simple phrase appears so harmlessharmless that it flies under the political radar. How could anyone, socialist, neoliberal or otherwise ever disagree that it is good to be neat and clean? Yet, upon further analysis, the ideology of neat and clean appears less innocuous. The phrase is essentially a statement about a set of rules regarding what does and does not belong in public space. Refuse belongs in the *dhalao* (fixed concrete dumpsters built in each neighborhood by the municipal government) but not inin the streets. Excess building materials belong in the city dump, not in a wooded corner of the colony. Defecation should happen only in bathrooms, etc.

Without needing to specify, "neat and clean" presupposes the distinction between public space and private space and the rules to govern the usage of thosethose two types of space. Moreover, it posits and presupposes the possibility and legitimacy of rules in the first place. In a word, "neat and clean" presupposes rationalization.

Irrational Labor and Dirty Neighborhoods

Delhi's RWAs believe that they understand perfectly well what comes between themselves and their desire to be neat and clean: neither citizens nor workers are doing their duty. Middle class residents don't respect public space; they throw their garbage, their excess building material, and their old car parts onto the streets and the parks. The servants of these people don't take the garbage all the way to the *dhalao* even when they are told to do so because very few residents are willing to fire their domestic help for an infraction as minor as littering. The municipal *safai karamcharis* are made hopelessly indolent by the security of their government jobs. The ragpickers and the garbage collectors separate what recyclables they can and spread the remainder on the ground. The various strategies that the RWAs use for dealing with these different causes of dirt and disorder are interesting topics in their own right, but for reasons of space, I will stay focused on the RWA's conflict with the informal garbage collectors.

The RWAs' attempt to gain control of the garbage collectors is expressed through the other poetic phrase that we have already encountered: "Hire and Fire." At one of the weekly meetings that I attended at Defence Colony, the RWA members said something very puzzling to the workers assembled in front of them. Mr. Arora warned that everyday there are new stories appearing in the paper about people being dissatisfied and turning their companies over to the

private sector. Electricity, water, rubbish hauling – it was all, in his ominous portrayal, going to

be privatized. Mrs. Chowdhury then suddenly broke into English: "no, no, it's a question of

'Hire and Fire,'" Then switching back into Hindi she said: "[In] private companies they watch, if

you didn't do your work, they throw you out and take someone else. This system exists in the

whole world, it's not like our government jobs where you get your wages whether you work or

not . . . like it is with the MCD." As rag-pickers and door-to-door garbage collectors, these

workers had nothing to do with the Municipal Corporation of Delhi or any other form of

government employment. In fact, they had all been self-employed with their proprietary

livelihood systems until they came under the yoke of the RWA. In my conversations with the

RWA members, they were aware that the sanitation workers had been self-employed in some

way but they seemed to be completely unaware of their practices of proprietary livelihood.

Government employees in this short lecture were being treated as a sort of stand-in for non-

competitive, non-performing workers to whom the informal garbage collectors were carelessly

being equated. This act of equation indicates that the main source of anxiety for the RWA

member is the license afforded by the absence of wage labor and the discipline that the latter

entails. The RWAs were not terribly concerned whether or not someone was a government

employee – in fact, they didn't always recognize the distinction – but they did want their workers

to fear dismissal and to understand that their chances of staying employed were directly related

to the work that they did.

       The RWAs believed that the introduction of work discipline among neighborhood

sanitation workers would improve the condition of their neighborhoods. The problem they faced

was that, within the context of the colony, each relationship between worker and customer

involved much more than just a fee for service. As we saw, the garbage collectors maintained a

complex, personal relationship to one another and to each of their patron households. Others –

servants, municipal workers, etc – worked under equally complex conditions in which the

amount and quality of the work performed were determined by norms and history within the

particular context of the worker-customer relationship. The very fact that this relationship was

self-referencing meant that workers and customers were primarily concerned with one another

and not with the generalized other, not the community as a whole. In order to get neighborhood

sanitation up to the standard that the RWAs desired, residents would have had to either take up

the doomed task of constantly interfering with these personal relations or of creating a workforce

that was beholden to a set of general rules. They had chosen the latter method and it was a

method that involved wage labor. As Weber observed, "free labour and the complete

appropriation of the means of production create the most favorable conditions for discipline

(Weber 1964 pp. 246-8)." To get that sort of power, the RWAs needed to obtain control over the

way that sanitation is produced in their neighborhoods.

Challenging Proprietary Livelihood

The story of how Mrs. Chowdhury and Mr. Arora implemented their desired system of hire-and-

fire discipline is quite revealing. They first had to engage in the difficult task of gathering

together the highly independent garbage collectors and ragpickers. As we saw in Chapter 2, the

garbage collectors owned exclusive rights to their own client list and so they, as the primary

owners, could keep their own hours, take vacations when they chose and bring in substitute

workers for themselves. Since each homeowner only knew their own garbage collector and

possibly that person's substitutes, it was hard for them identify all the garbage collectors in the colony and even harder to get them to agree to come to a meeting.

They tried to persuade them to willingly participate in their proposed changes by promising them protective equipment, proper containers, better carts/rickshaws and regular pay. The garbage collectors initially had no interest whatsoever. Because RWA members did not understand how invested they were in the status quo, they could not understand why the garbage collectors were so reluctant to cooperate. This was happening at about the same time that Defence Colony had begun controlling the entry points of the colony with gates and guards and demanding that people who worked for the residents of neighborhood be registered with guards. The garbage collectors and ragpickers still managed to dodge this requirement and so the RWA enlisted the help of the police. With all this pressure arrayed against them, they finally relented and joined the RWA's program.

But a few curious facts made me realize that the story was more complicated than the one presented by Mrs. Chowdhury and Mr. Arora. The first was that the garbage collectors were still being paid by the individual households and not directly by the RWA, which did not want to be responsible for handling so much cash. The second was that fines were levied against them as either deductions from the payments of the complaining households or as cash payments made back to the RWA by the offending worker (underscoring that they weren't being paid directly by the RWA). Another was that Mrs. Chowdhury had told me that the RWA had never in fact fired anybody, which, from her perspective, was out of sympathy.

From the workers' perspective, however, something different was going on. In my interviews with the garbage collectors, they were still referring to the group of households that

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they served as their *ilaaka,* implying that they still believed that they owned their client lists. When I asked the garbage collectors what they would do if they were to be fired, one replied that "the areas are ours, we won't be dismissed" [*"Ilaake to hamare hi hai, dismissal nahin ho jaaega"*]. The others nodded in agreement. As I talked to them more, it became clear that, from their perspective, not much had actually changed. They had to put up with multiple new inconveniences, such as the meetings and the fines but they had had retained the most important part of their old lives, the proprietary rights over their livelihood.

The practice in which the garbage collectors themselves organize their own substitute workers is actually an indication that even the RWA had not fully modernized their own system. Modern employers usually find substitutes for absent workers on their own for absent workers on their own because they want control over who's labor they're buying. Although the RWA members didn't know it, they were encouraging the belief among the garbage collectors that they owned their jobs as a piece of family property and hence any family member could take care of business.

So, despite the efforts of the RWA members, their attempt to implement a hire-and-fire culture among the garbage collectors was not fully successful. Interestingly, they did not seem to fully understand that it was not successful and certainly did not understand that a radically different set of economic relationships was occurring right under their noses. One could say that a perpectival disjuncture existed between the homeowner and the garbage collectors. One could say that a perpectival disjuncture existed between the homeowner and the garbage collectors. In the next section, I will show that this pattern of attempted rationalization through proletarianization was present in other upper middle class neighborhoods as well.

III. Other Examples:

Asiad Village and Vatavaran

To the best of my knowledge, the trend of neighborhood level sanitation reform originated with the efforts of Dr. Iqbal Mallick, a woman from Asiad Village who founded an NGO called Vatavaran. Having returned from a long period in the United States, this primatologist could not tolerate the mess of her supposedly upscale colony. In her neighborhood, garbage collectors did not exist, as far as she knew, but there were ragpickers who independently sifted through the *dhalaos*. Offended at the mess that ragpickers left but at the same time sympathetic to their plight, she came up with the idea of employing them as door-to-door garbage collectors.

Fully embodying the spirit of neo-liberal development ideology, Dr. Mallick's hope was to create a win-win situation; the ragpickers would get a steady source of income while the neighborhood would get more efficient sanitation. The program began very informally when she approached some of the local ragpickers and assigned each one his or her own area. Using her own funds, she purchased three high-walled rickshaws and sent each one around the colony with a team of two or three persons. Participation was completely voluntary, and there was difficulty in convincing some of the rag-pickers, but soon enough they all joined. Each individual household was free to ignore Vatavaran's services which cost 20 rupees per kitchen.

In addition to the appearance of the neighborhood, Dr. Mallick was also interested in its environmental sustainability. Composting was a major part of Vatavaran's purpose and to that end Mrs. Iqbal contacted the RWA and had them approve "wastelands" of the colony for use in making anaerobic composting pits. Initially, only about one in four households joined, but after

she began using shaming tactics against her non-compliant neighbors (banging a drum in front of residences where litter was found) participation improved to about three households in four. At first, Dr. Mallick managed Vatavaran with occasional help from just a few volunteers, but due to the expansion of the organization and some severe medical problems which afflicted her in1999, she later hired two young managers.

After its success in Asiad Village, word of mouth helped Vatavaran expand even further: "We never wrote a letter, we never contacted any government officials, we never went to any newspaper," Dr. Mallick told me, "but those six hundred [households] were my messengers." The first two projects that Vatavaran opened outside of Asiad Village were on the Jawaharlal Nehru University campus and in Vasant Vihar, another very elite colony. Shortly thereafter, they opened a project in Nizamudin, which was where the Chief Minister of Delhi was living at the time. She was immediately interested in the project and championed it as an example of Bhagidari in action.

Consistent with neoliberal development strategy, Vatavaran follows basic market principles. It not only recovers cost, but also earns proceeds from the sale of recyclables (as a non-profit organization, Vatavaran must use its earning to further its mission). Since the workers are responsible for a single route, it is easy to keep tabs on each person's performance. Each unit has a supervisor, usually a senior worker, who takes attendance, records complaints against each worker, and collects the money from the participating households. Every garbage collector starts at the same wage, but Dr. Mallick grants them a raise on the basis of performance.

I was not able to interview anyone besides Dr. Mallick who witnessed the implementation of Vatavaran's programs in different neighborhoods but I strongly suspect that there was more

conflict with the existing garbage collectors and ragpickers than Dr. Mallick was aware of (I

don't think she was dissembling in any way). In the cases described below there was significant

conflict.

Sheikh Sarai

Dr. Mallick's history of Vatavaran presents a story of harmonious implementation, but others

offer a narrative marked by local strife. One of the colonies that contacted Vatavaran was Sheikh

Sarai, a colony of "self financing" flats in the far south of the city. In this colony, the drive to

spearhead the reform of sanitation was led by a young woman named Anya Gupta, who acted as

their project leader on this issue. Along with many other residents of this colony, she had

become frustrated with the state of the colony. Unlike Asiad Village, Sheik Sarai had a very well

established group of door-to-door garbage collectors. Ms. Gupta seemed to understand the

proprietary livelihood practices of the garbage collectors better than any of the RWA members I

met. According to Ms. Gupta, the mess was caused by the "territorial" system of these workers.

Since no other worker could encroach on any given worker's clients, the residents had no

recourse; they could not punish the garbage collectors in any way for poor performance. Her

complaints were much like those of Dr. Mallick: the workers were unreliable, sometimes

disappearing for weeks on end (most likely because they were visiting relatives in their home

villages). When they were working, they would throw the garbage in places it didn't belong or

leave it on the road after they had removed the recyclables.

Their initial intention in contacting Vatavaran was to treat the organization as a sort of

subcontracting agent. Vatavaran was to supply the sweepers with the people who had the

technical knowledge regarding anaerobic composting and the RWA would supply them with the

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laborers to actually haul the garbage. Once introduced, the laborers would be employed by and under the management of Vatavaran. The hope was that the hassle of managing the workers would fall on the NGO rather than the RWA.

The transition did not, however, prove to be easy. The existing garbage collectors resisted the change. Vatavaran made it a policy to offer any existing garbage collector or rag-pickers a job when they initiated a program, but in Sheikh Sarai, the garbage collectors refused, presumably because they were afraid of what would happen to their own client lists. Vatavaran brought in its own people, who came with uniforms, equipment and a supervisor to discipline them. The existing workers protested vociferously for about six months, they even threatened violence. For quite some time they were worried about retaliation. Someone threatened to throw acid in Anya Gupta's face. There were only about six workers involved but Ms. Gupta said that she knew that they all belonged to the "sweeper" community and that this community had a reputation for cohesion in these matters as well as a willingness to resort to violence. From my experience, she was probably right on all counts. The conflict seemed to resolve itself and no one was physically hurt in the end.

That a conflict involving people's proprietary livelihood would be settled with relative ease was quite surprising to me. When I pushed my inquiry on the topic further, Ms. Gupta became slightly embarrassed. She said that she had not known at the time, but in hindsight she surmised that a dispute of considerable intensity was occurring between the previous set of informal workers and those sent by Vatavaran. She knew full well that they were protesting and threatening her, but she also suspected that they leveled threats against the workers of Vatavaran. Now she believes that the situation was finally resolved in Vatavaran's favor because the

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supervisor of the Vatavaran staff, another Balmiki man known as Raj Kumar, had raised his own muscle power and responded with his own threats against the old group of workers. Perhaps some compromise was worked out or perhaps his brawn was sufficient to make the original set of workers relent in the end.

The members of the Sheikh Sarai RWA later realized that Raj Kumar was actually quite corrupt. Between the sale of *kabari* (recyclables) and the household charges, Vatavaran is supposed to generate excess revenues. Under Raj Kumar's leadership, however, they never did more than break even. It turned out that Raj Kumar was pocketing all the surpluses in addition to his own salary. Moreover, it also became clear that he was charging the workers "*mahina,*" a form of forced commission demanded by the intermediary who was responsible for getting a worker a job. In Chapters 2 and 3, we saw such illicit commissions were charged within the MCD and also by labor intermediaries of early twentieth century Bombay. This practice was a problem for the RWA in part because it simply was not what had been agreed upon and indicated dishonesty on the part of Raj Kumar. But it was also a problem because it set up a relationship of reciprocity between the employee and the manager. Given that the salaries were not that high, such payments would only make sense if the employee did not expect to get fired for quite some time, if at all. It also encourages the supervisors to stay with the workers they know because with each new worker they run the risk of losing the bribe or, worse, being exposed. The bribe-taking supervisor also tends to protect the employee, partly to ensure the steady supply of money and partly because the two are joined together in illegitimate behavior – the employees thus become more like vassals than laborers.

The Sheikh Sarai RWA thus decided to part ways with Raj Kumar and Vatavaran soon after they had begun working with him. They had in the meantime developed contacts with their own group of *safai karamcharis* (who, unsurprisingly, turned out to be Balmikis as well). Using these connections, they installed yet a third group of workers. Ms. Gupta insisted that the new group of workers was and still is firmly under the RWAs supervision. The RWA is now making money off its *kabari* which it channels back into the garbage removal system and other community projects.

The composting, interestingly enough, seems to have fallen by the wayside as if it was only secondary to the need to create a systematic, reliable, and from the resident's point of view, more efficient garbage collection system. Creating this system meant first and foremost disciplining the labor force. The door-to-door garbage collectors were given set routes and set standards that they had to follow. If garbage was found anywhere other than the *dhalao*, the workers would be held be accountable. Personal leave and sick days were stipulated by the RWA. The workers also all wear uniforms (the T-shirts that had originally been provided by Vatavaran!) to prevent unknown workers from entering the neighborhood. Failure to adhere to these stipulations would result in fines and, potentially, dismissal.

Other Places

In Gulmohar Enclave, the RWA contracted an NGO called Naya Savera to improve its garbage situation. Naya Savera, which operated in a very similar manner to Vatavaran, offered to employ the existing the garbage collectors, but they refused the offer the offer. Anticipating violence, the RWA contacted the police to be on special alert for about two weeks after the NGO took over. In

the end, the transition went smoothly, and the RWA had been generally very happy with the results. The Green Park RWA had also contracted with Naya Savera and the processprocess much the same. Many other colonies such as Vasant Vihar, Hauz Khas, and Green Park Extension had also begun similar programs to take control of sanitation and sanitation workers in their neighborhoods.

Since the RWAs do not report this sort of activity to any larger body, there are unfortunately no statistics available regarding how many of Delhi's RWAs have modified their sanitation systems. My research on neighborhood sanitation does indicate that the process of either directly employing garbage collectors or subcontracting the work out to NGOs who specialize in this sort of work was a growing trend. The MCD was subcontracting out the road cleaning services of a massive residential subdivision of Delhi known as Dwarka to an NGO called the Centre for Development Communication, which also worked in Jaipur and Nagpur. In the absence of any strong middle class criticism of these types of programs, there is good reason to think that the trend will continue.

IV. Class Interest, Class Dominance, and the meanings of "Bourgeois" and "Subaltern"

What I have been trying to show so far is that this group of RWAs was unknowingly attempting to displace practices of transparently social wealth by rationalizing their local sanitation systems. To be clear, they wanted to rationalize their local systems in a bourgeois-modern way, to impose a set of rules that that treated public property as the *property of the public*, that is, as areas that needed to be kept clean for the benefit of a nameless and faceless everyone. To achieve this goal

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they needed to make the workers follow such rules; to do that, they needed to discipline the sanitation workers; to do that, they needed to threaten them with fines and dismissal; and, finally, to do that, they needed the workers to be employees, if not of the RWA itself, then of some trustworthy organization.

The main reason that the existing sanitation workers were not following the rules was that they were involved in that particular type of transparently social wealth that I have been have been calling "proprietary livelihood." As shown in Chapter 2, both the formal MCD *safai karamcharis* and the informal garbage collectors were conducting the practices of proprietary livelihood and, so, despite their differences, both types of workers effectively owned social positions, ones that came with both a set of obligations and a source of sustenance. Under these arrangements, they followed their own rules and these rules generally treated public spaces more like "outside" spaces than as public spaces (i.e., as collectively owned pieces of property). More importantly, they were not employees in any meaningful sense of the word and thus they could not be disciplined through the threat of termination.

This form of transparently social wealth put the sanitation workers beyond the reach of most disciplinary measures, including those of the state, which was itself heavily penetrated by transparently social wealth and so only minimally interested in following its own rules. The only feasible way for the RWAs to achieve rationalization was thus through proletarianization of the workforce and this meant that the workers had to be removed from their owned livelihoods. As I argued in the introduction to this dissertation and in Chapter 2, the destruction of these social positions, these owned livelihoods, should be seen as a form of expropriation. For similar

reasons, I also argued that proprietary livelihood serves as as an insulator from the condition of expropriated freedom that otherwise pervades India.

Given the centrality of discipline to the RWA's quest for rationalization, it seems appropriate to draw comparisons to Foucault's analysis of discipline in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe (Foucault 1979). Similarities clearly exist, but the fact that the rationalization of sanitation is being done through the proletarianization of the workforce and that it is being spearheaded by a specific socio-economic group, forces us to consider questions that Foucault generally resisted: namely, those of economics and class.

In this dissertation, I have been focussing on economic relations as they pertain to the commodification of labor, or, more notably, the absence thereof. To consider the role of economics and class in the politics of sanitation, we must also consider the concept being described by the adjective "bourgeois." I have been regularly using the adjective in the phrase "bourgeois modern," which I borrowed from Dipesh Chakrabarty. In a similar vein, Partha Chatterjee used the adjective when he raised the question, "Are Indian cities becoming Bourgeois at Last?" (Chatterjee 2004:131-147). By this, he was not asking if urban areas were becoming wealthier or if they were becoming the sole domain of those who owned the means of production. What he was asking, rather, was whether or not Indian cities were beginning to follow their own rules:

> In metropolis after Indian metropolis, organized civic groups have come forward to demand from the administration and the judiciary that laws and regulations for the proper use of land, public spaces and thoroughfares be formulated and strictly adhered to in order to improve the quality of life of citizens. Everywhere the dominant cry seems to be to rid the city of encroachers and polluters and, as it were, to give the city back to its proper citizens. (Chatterjee 2004:140)

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The "dominant cry" was, in other words, for governance, order, regulation, and legality. It was not primarily for new laws and regulations but to protect the existing ones against the practices of bribery, patrimonialism, and illegitimate violence – much of which would fall under my category of transparently social wealth. In other words, the cry of the middle class, about which Chatterjee had mixed feelings, was for homogeneous sovereignty.

Chatterjee was a little bit vague about what constitutes the opposite of bourgeois in that specific piece but elsewhere he clearly contrasted the "elite" to the "subaltern" (Chatterjee 1993, 12). In Chakrabarty's look at differing attitudes to sanitation, he very bluntly stated that the conflict was "a battle of the bourgeois moderns versus the subaltern citizens (Chakrabarty 2002)." What then are the qualities described by these two opposing adjectives?

The RWAs, which are very much a part of thee dominant [8]cry of the bourgeois moderns, do not demand rules for their own sake but for the benefits they are said to bring to the population at large to the population at large. The RWAs believe that their project of improving sanitation will benefit rich and poor alike. As one RWA member correctly noted, it is the poor who suffer most from outbreaks of disease as well as environmental degradation because it is they who cannot afford good health care (see Chaplin 1999). The wealthy in many ways required sanitation less immediately than the poor as they were better able to afford personal health care and were otherwise able to isolate themselves from dirty public spaces by patronizing Delhi's malls, restaurants, gyms and private clubs. They see the process of rationalization as one that subjects both themselves and the workers to an external standard and thus to a more fair and consistent method of organizing work. They even consider the hire and fire culture to be of

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[8] An important rejoinder to Chatterjee is that is that members of the middle class often complains that they are NOT the dominant voice and that the unruliness of "political society" swamps their concerns.

public interest in so far as it fosters a culture of efficiency and gives innumerable hard working people access to jobs from which they would otherwise be excluded. Rationalized sanitation, as far as the RWAs are concerned, is a public good, a good that benefits the population at large.

In my conversations with left-wing activists, by contrast, the supposed benefits of sanitation were often portrayed as smokescreens for the interests of the wealthy. The unfortunate reality for the poor, the progressive activists tended to argue, was that they could not afford to be interested in abstract benefits like sanitation because they had to focus on short term basics like food and shelter. The middle classes, from the progressive point of view, wanted to take away the few chances that the poor had to garner some measure of wealth and security (as the MCD *safai karamcharis* had been able to do) in the name of public goods like sanitation and clean air. Regarding shelter, the poor could ill afford to buy authorized housing so they were condemned to live in unplanned, unsanitary slum settlements. When they were offered undeveloped plots, they were in resettlement colonies, which were located on the distant outskirts of the city. The middle class and the super wealthy were just as notorious as the poor for encroaching on public land and stealing electricity. The scenario, as progressives saw it, was one in which, Delhi's middle classes were not willing to give up cheap labor but were willing to wage a war on the already low standard of living of the workings classes

The accusation of hypocrisy against the middle classes is undoubtedly true of many of its members, but the RWA members that I talked to quite seriously castigated their own neighbors as much as they did the poor. One of the major complaints was that homeowners would dump old building materials in the parks after they had completed renovations on their homes. Defence Colony, for example, was beginning a program to identify the culprits and sanction them,

although they had not had much success at the time. Still, it would be simplistic to conceive of the politics of sanitation in Delhi as having been nothing but a war between the rich and the poor. Delhi's politics of sanitation was definitely a class issue but it was neither a conflict between capital and labor nor a war between the rich and the poor.

So, was it a conflict between bourgeois moderns and subaltern citizens? I have been characterizing the conflict as one between the advocates of homogeneous sovereignty and the defenders of transparently social wealth. The former wanted biological safety, public tidiness and a general adherence to official rules in the context of a state and society that didn't seem to adequately adequately provide these things The latter were looking for existential security (and, in some cases, fame and fortune) in a world that otherwise obstructed them from obtaining it. Both of these classes existed under the pervasive condition of expropriated freedom but, through good salaries, property ownership and pensions, the former was able to obtain existential security within the logic of commodity exchange; by doing so, they were able to stay in compliance with the rule of equivalence and the demands of homogenous sovereignty. Indeed, we saw that they were not only in compliance with these strictures but were also cheerleaders for them. This path was not open to the latter class and so they sought to obtain and preserve *social locations* in the sense described in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Getting and keeping social locations necessarily entwines people in context-bound and partisan relationships; these relationships make it nary impossible to respect the demands of homogeneous sovereignty.

I would like to suggest that these observations and analyses can help us refine our usage of the words "bourgeois" and "subaltern," especially in the urban context. If we assume that expropriated freedom is the default condition of nearly everyone in the global south in the

twenty-first century (as I believe we should), then we also have to assume that most people are either living in that condition or actively keeping themselves out of it. With these assumptions in mind, then perhaps we have to redefine both terms with respect to the default condition of expropriated freedom. Perhaps, the adjective "bourgeois" should be taken to describe those who are capable of identifying with homogeneous sovereignty because they are able to find existential security amidst the ravages of expropriated freedom without breaking the rule of equivalence. Conversely, perhaps the adjective "subaltern" should be taken to describe those who must find their existential security in the heterogeneous practices of transparently social wealth.

Whether or not these words need to be redefined, the conflict between the RWAs and the sanitation workers of their neighborhood shows us that the poor sanitary conditions in Delhi and elsewhere are not only due to conceptual issues of hygiene and public/private space and not only due to the absence of an effective disciplinary apparatus but are also due to the sanitation workers' struggle for existential security.

Chapter 6
Bad Rent, Bad Ownership, and Bad States: How Transparently Social Wealth Disturbs Bourgeois Ideology

> "Wages and Profits are the creation of man. They are the recompense for the sacrifice made in the one case, of ease, in the other, of immediate enjoyment. But a considerable part of the produce of every country is the recompense of no sacrifice whatever; it is received by those who neither labour nor put by, but merely hold out their hands to accept the offerings of the rest of the community."
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> Nassau William Senior on rent, 1836

Introduction

In the first four chapters of this dissertation, I described the ways in which the economic

practices of Delhi's Balmiki Community exemplify what I have been calling "transparently

social wealth," that is, wealth that is not only social but also *experienced as social*. In Chapter 5,

I provided several examples of how this transparently social wealth had come into conflict with

the bourgeois predispositions of upper middle-class homeowners. The primary argument of this

dissertation as whole has been that the Balmiki's economic practices threaten the

modern/capitalist world. What I hope to do in this final chapter of the dissertation is to show the

precise ways in which these transparently social forms of wealth threaten modern/capitalist

ideology. To do so properly, it is necessary to engage the most articulate and powerful

proponents of the ideology, economists.

Representing the perspective of economists presents a challenge for my project because none have directly produced accounts of Balmiki economic practices (as far as I know). The purpose of this chapter is thus to head off the economists at the metaphorical pass. While some scholars might argue that a topic that forces its author to speculate about what others *would* say rather than what they *are* saying is one that is not worth pursuing, but I would disagree for two reasons: first, the discipline of economics must be engaged because of its immense institutional and societal power; and, second, we are only dealing with the broad and (I believe) uncontroversial categorizations that those versed in economics would make of Balmiki practices and therefore we can have relatively high confidence in this act of imputation. Regarding the latter reason, there should be no doubt that economists would categorize the economic practices that permeate Balmiki life as some combination of "rent capture" and "rent seeking behavior" were they to analyze them. Consider some instances of the practices in question: union organizing among municipal workers; political patronage; the cartelistic and monopolistic activities of informal sector workers; bribery, kickbacks, extortion, and the use of violence to facilitate all these activities. These phenomenon are all regularly cited as examples within the literature on rent capture and rent seeking (J. M. Buchanan, Tollison, and Tullock 1980; Krueger 1974; Tollison 1982; Tullock 1967). Were economists to analyze the everyday lives of Balmikis, they would find socio-economic conditions in which plenty of working class Balmikis were rent seekers, rent payers and rent avoiders. They would, in other words, find an economic scenario suffused with rent. As I make my argument below, these assertions will be justified and the concept of rent will be thoroughly explained.

While very few people ever have to distinguish between incomes that are technically

rents, profits, or wages, economists have to do so very regularly. What I will be arguing in this chapter is that the concept of rent stabilizes the bourgeois ideological framework of which the other two forms of revenue are a part. My argument will primarily concern itself with the worldview of mainstream economists, both living and dead, both classical and neo-classical. I will argue that the *bourgeois side* of modern/capitalist ideology uses the concept of rent to name and contain the transparently social forms of wealth that it would otherwise find very threatening.

To review a point I made in the introduction, all wealth is inherently social but not all wealth is experienced as such. To put this another way, the material existence of individuals is always made possible by the collectivity in which they live but this fact is not always apparent to those same individuals. In my discussions of proprietary livelihood, I provided recent and not-so recent historical examples in which the sociality of wealth was very directly experienced. In many of those examples, the social relationship itself *was* the wealth. In providing these examples, I was (and am) bolstering and elaborating a point that Marx made about medieval Europe. In that context, he argued, the "social relationships between individuals in the performance of their labour appear at all events as their own personal relations (Marx 1976, 170)." To access land, medieval serfs had to be in a subservient relationship to the lord and perform labor for him. To farm the land, serfs depended on their family units, whose legitimacy was granted by the Church, which was, in turn, an institution to which people had to tithe. To grind their grain, the serfs had to contract exclusively with the lord's miller. To get beyond mere physical sustenance, the serfs had to hope for the lord's beneficence on religious holidays. Breaking the norms of these relationships put one at risk not only of violent punishment but also

of losing friends, family, and future wealth. So, in medieval Europe, as in the examples I provided earlier in this dissertation, the collectivity that enabled one's material existence was the same as the community in which one lived. What this then implied was that individuals had no choice but to personally and interpersonally experience the sociality of their wealth[1] – in all its troublesome intimacy.

One of Marx's chief criticisms of capitalist society is that the sociality of its wealth is not directly experienced by its members. The wealth of capitalist societies, as he proclaims in the first sentence of *Capital,* "appears as an immense collection of commodities" (Marx 1976, 125). These commodities are of course the end result of a complicated social process of production, but they arrive at the consumer as individuated items that are bought and sold on an impersonal market. To obtain these items, all the consumer has to do is hand over some money (itself a special class of commodity). One does not have to pay obeisance to a lord, or pray before a priest, or pay respects to the seller on holidays. With regard to material existence, the only social relationships that people experience are "the momentary contacts" of exchange,[2] *mere* exchanges that are (or appear to be) disconnected from all other social relationships and all other aspects of the production process. The same is true for the seller of commodities, even if that person is selling labor. For Marx, there is a great irony in all of this because the capitalist mode of production is the most collectivized one in human history. Capitalism removes its own collective

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[1] By way of clarification, I am not implying here that any human experience is ever unmediated. As I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the sociality of wealth in capitalism is removed from the realm of experience. Under non-capitalist relations, the sociality of the wealth appears to the subject as relationships with other people. The village sweeper knows that her access to her clients is dependent on being deferential to them, on not drinking from the village well, on *not* accusing the upper castes of rape (even if they are guilty), etc., and, so she is experiencing the sociality of her wealth *as sociality.* It is in that sense that I mean that it is possible for people to "directly experience the sociality of their wealth."
[2] See the Penguin edition of *Capital, Volume 1*, page 183.

nature from the realm of direct experience. This is not, let me be clear, a Machiavellian ploy of the capitalist class but rather an ineluctable consequence of the fact that capitalist wealth must necessarily manifest itself as commodities (Rubin 1972, 28).

Because commodity wealth is not experienced as social, bourgeois ideology finds fertile ground in capitalist society. As I pointed out in the introduction to this dissertation, bourgeois society is not the same as capitalist society, but the ideology of the former is helpful to functioning of the latter. I proceed on the assumption that bourgeois economic ideology is anchored to one central ideal: the freedom of the individual to make voluntary choices in the marketplace. Among the necessary links in the anchor's chain are the ideals of market competition, private ownership, and equal treatment before the law. The necessary institutional expression of these ideological links is a state that organizes itself around the "rule of law" rather than the "rule of men." Doing so requires the ideal bourgeois state to govern through an impartially and homogeneously applied set of rules, a process which, in turn, requires the state to keep itself above the unavoidable heterogeneity of society. The ideal bourgeois government thus exercises what David Held called "the rule of equivalence" (Held 1980, 66), or, what we might also think of as "homogeneous sovereignty."

Practices of transparently social wealth, like those described in this dissertation, challenge all aspects of bourgeois ideology. But, unlike the revolutionary practices of communists, they do it from below. In their exclusivity and violence, these transparently social forms of wealth threaten the ideals of voluntary choice, competition, and rule of law. As I tried to show in Chapters 2 and 3, they also threaten bourgeois ideals by turning social positions into property and allowing layered and exclusive forms of ownership. In Chapter 4, I showed that the

transparently social wealth of a gangster, as mustered through the forces of charisma, identitarian politics, labor action and outright extortion, could also threaten bourgeois ideals.

These practices also threaten the ideal form of the bourgeois state. Many of the practices are directly illegal while many others involve the corruption of government officers, the jockeying for official favors, etc. What they all have in common is that they disrupt the uniform application of the law. The practices, in other words, force the homogeneous sovereignty of the ideal bourgeois state into conflict with the intractable heterogeneity of lived sociality. A key part of this is the way that these practices constitute property. The bourgeois ideal of property has just two claimants on the property: its nominal private owner and the state (the body that enforces bourgeois rules of ownership and thus actually controls the property's final disposition) (Mizushima 2004, 251). The only parties that make a third-party claim are those that are authorized by these two "principals." In proprietary livelihood, as I showed, property usually has multiple claimants and each of them authorizes themselves to exert *partial* control over the property, usually with a background threat of violence. Not only does this challenge the state's monopoly on violence; it also challenges its position as the ultimate controller of the property. These practices thus threaten to bring in a "parcelized sovereignty, "[3] an anathema to bourgeois ideology.

If most of the practices described in this dissertation are threats from below, some are also threats from above, or, at least, closely related to such threats. Much of the transparently social wealth that Balmikis experience is closely tied to government spending; city sanitation jobs are an obvious example. Modern states retain a bourgeois dimension, but their interventionist

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[3] This phrase comes from the Perry Anderson's *Lineages of the Absolutest State* (1974, 15)

tendencies turn them something more complicated. Whether their interventions are welfarist,

regulatory, developmentalist or otherwise, they bring the political process into the marketplace.

In so doing, they are necessarily creating rules and allocating capital in ways that affect some

more than others. The example of India's systems of positive discrimation for the lower castes is

highly relevant here. Interventions thus break the rule of equivalence in market processes and,

for economists of the libertarion or neo-liberal persuasion (e.g., Mises, Hayek, and Friedman),

state intervention is indeed a very threatening thing. This is less true for other economists

because interventions by a well-disciplined state do at least follow the rule of law but, for them

too, interventions in the market must be justified against the norm of "perfect liberty." State

interventions, however perfectly they may follow legal and bureaucratic rules, also involve

transparently social wealth at least at some level of government. Instead of arising from a

market process, they come from and are distributed by political processes: appeals are made to

voters, deals are made with politicians, help from interest groups is mobilized, etc.

Economists would see virtually all the gains that emanate from these transparently social

forms wealth as rent. In both its classical and neo-classical[4] conceptions, rent is a form of

"recompense for no sacrifice,"[5] a receipt of "something for nothing." [6] We'll see below that this

idea of a sacrifice-free gain stems from the (correct) classical notion that the practice of private

land ownership allows landowners to exclude others from the usage of their land and thereby

gives them the right to seize whatever "gifts of nature"[7] they find on or underneath it. Were it

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[4] Below, we shall see that there is a significant difference between the neo-classical and classical conceptions of rent but that the economists of the former school end up re-deploying something similar.

[5] Marx, *Capital,* vol. 3, p. 906

[6] See Chapter 2 of Ricardo's *The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation (2016, 34)*

[7] John Locke reflected this reasoning in 17th century when he argued that by nature ". . . the earth, and all inferior creatures, be common to all men . . ." but that people could appropriate portions of that common property through labor (see section 27 of his *Second Treatise on Government).*

not for the institution of private property, everyone would be free to utilize those gifts of nature[8] and, moreover, because land and the natural resources it holds cannot be produced or reproduced by humans, landowners essentially hold monopoly rights over their tracts of ground. Since those rights are backed up by the violence of the state, the landowners are in essence extorting wealth from those who wish to use their land; this extorted wealth is the rent.

We will see that, over the course of nineteenth century, rent evolves from something narrowly tied to land and natural resources to something that is virtually indistinguishable from a general notion of surplus – meaning that rent, profit and better-than-average wages become virtually indistinguishable. Post-Ricardian classical economists as well as their neo-classical descendants redefined rent in such a way that it can be generated by things other than land or natural resources. It will become evident that the process of earning rent changes from (a) the process of obtaining *value* in exchange for something that has none to (b) a process of receiving more *utility* than would otherwise be required to engage in a given transaction. As rent changes to the latter notion, it becomes virtually indistinguishable from a general notion of surplus and yet it still retains that something-for-nothing characteristic which it had in the work of Adam Smith. In this later formulation, windfall profits are rents and so are the salaries of great athletes.

In the last sections of this chapter, I will argue that, despite the extreme breadth of the newer concept of rent, economists (and political scientists) still use it to name and contain threats to the bourgeois-capitalist worldview. To do this, they very literally create a distinction between "good rent" and "bad rent," where the latter category describes rent seeking, rent capture and the like. The valence of "bad rent" ranges from gains made from gains made from perfectly legal

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[8] See Chapter 11 of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations (Smith 1976, 162)*

activities like lobbying all the way to the revenues of violent crime.the revenues of violent crime. The proprietary livelihood practices that I described in Chapter 2 and the activities of Mor Singh would all be clear examples of "bad rent." Indeed, all the sorts of phenomena that I have described as transparently social wealth, which all involve the use of soft and hard power to secure better revenue streams than the market would otherwise afford, would count as "bad rent" underunder this formulation.

What I will argue in this chapter is that the concept of rent does a particular kind of work for economists. I will show that it takes the gains made through transparently social wealth, which are otherwise highly complex and embedded in social life and reduces them to *mere* revenue – a simple income or benefit. By doing so, it allows the economists to fit any complex social process that violates market ideals into the bourgeois worldview of a universe populated by *homo economicus*. To put it another way, I will show that, despite the big changes that happen in the conceptualization of rent, it retains its utility as way of neutralizing the threats represented by transparently social wealth.

An Introduction to the Concept of Rent:

Because I have found that very few members of my discourse community have a good understanding of the concept of rent, I'd like briefly to explain why it has its peculiar something-for-nothing characteristic. Let us begin with the classical notion of rent-of-land. I have already mentioned that this type of rent is uniquely tied to the private ownership of something non-reproducible. For classical economists, all income or revenue falls into one of three categories: wages, profit, or rent. Each of the three is associated with a basic factor of production: rent is

derived from land, wages from labor, and profit from capital. To be more specific, wages, profit, and rent are classifications of how a certain revenue was earned: wages come from either consuming the products of one's own labor or from exchanging themem with the products of the products of someone else's labor labor; profit comes from deploying one's stock of capital (products of labor that one forgoes consuming in order to obtain future gains); rent comes from charging a fee for the use of land (and possibly the removal of the natural resources beneath it). As Smith writes:

> The wood of the forest, the grass of the field, and all the natural products of the earth, which, when land was in common, cost the labourer only the trouble of gathering them, come, even to him, to have an additional cost fixed upon them. He must then pay for the license to gather them; and must give up to the landlord a portion of what his labour either collects or produces. This portion, or what comes to the same thing, the price of this portion, constitutes the rent of land . . . (Smith 1976, 56)

Here, Smith clearly articulates the basic concept of rent that we outlined above – a fee paid to gain access to something that is only denied because someone else has the power to do so. The power comes from two sources: the institution of private property and the fact that the resource cannot be reproduced. Smith is very clear in this passage that private ownership of land is a human convention and not a part of the "rude state of society." As with profit, Smith sees rent to be an intervention in a default condition in which people earn only wages through the exchanges of equivalent values (measured in average labor time). So rent and profit are both similar in that both siphon off some of the productivity of labor in a unidirectional movement (Smith 1976, 73). To the extent that rent payments are exchanges, they are exchanges of products of labor for *permission*; they are not exchanges of equal values.

To understand the peculiar character of rent, it is helpful to distinguish technical,

economic rent from rent in its more colloquial, American sense. When Americans talk about

renting a car or renting a tuxedo, they mean that they are paying money to use an asset for a

period of time. The income generated from this relationship, often called "contract rent," should

really be thought of as a fee for the maintenance, storage, and other activities associated with

providing a particular good for a particular period of time. Most of the revenue will be a

combination of wages and profits but very little of the income will be "rent" in the specific

economic sense of the term. Likewise, only a part of the payments one makes to a modern

landlord for a house or an apartment constitutes "rent" in this technical sense. Most of what one

pays to a typical landlord is the fee-for-service that covers the cost of maintaining the physical

structure of the building and its associated grounds (including capital costs). Another part of the

revenue that the landlord collects, in most cases anyway, covers no cost at all but is simply

derived from the privilege of owning the land on which the building sits. This latter portion is

the true, economic rent.

To elucidate the peculiar character of rent, I'd like to borrow an evocative illustration

penned by the neo-classical economist Robert Schiller in an editorial on "rent-seeking:"

> The classic example of rent-seeking is that of a feudal lord who installs a chain
> across a river that flows through his land and then hires a collector to charge
> passing boats a fee (or rent of the section of the river for a few minutes) to lower
> the chain. There is nothing productive about the chain or the collector. The lord
> has made no improvements to the river and is helping nobody in any way, directly
> or indirectly, except himself. All he is doing is finding a way to make money from
> something that used to be free (Shiller 2013).

The feudal lord in this example is using force to control access to a resource that was not only

previously free but also irreplaceable. People can't just make a new river that connects the

places they want to go. Because of this, the feudal lord is able to pull wealth towards himself in

a purely unidirectional manner. This extorted income is the economic rent in its technical sense. Aside from its useful images, Schiller's passage also helps show that twenty-first century economists have retained this something-for-nothing dimension from their eighteenth century forebears.

This dimension does not exist in contract rent. When a firm "rents out" reproducible items like cars and tuxedos, competitors can enter the market for those items and drive the rates down to the point where they just cover the labor and capital costs (including market rates for return on the capital). In a perfectly competitive market, firms that "rent out" cars, tuxedos, and similar reproducible items will earn no rent in the technical sense of the term.

In contrast to cars and tuxedos, land can generate rent even in a perfectly competitive market. This is because land cannot be feasibly reproduced and, to the extent that it can be, its *location* absolutely cannot be reproduced. For this reason, owners of land are able take wealth without giving anything in return. For yet further illustration, allow me to present the following scenario: you have inherited land from long dead relatives in the sparsely populated U.S. State of Wyoming. Your ancestors obtained it under the nineteenth nineteenth century Homestead Act, which allowed white settlers to acquire legal title to tracts of land if they made some form of "improvements" upon it. Prior to the arrival of your ancestors, this land was being collectively used by Native Americans and the animals they depended on, but they, as far as we know, would not have treated it as privately owned property. Your ancestors were thus the land's first *owners*. Whatever improvements they made to the land have long since decayed and it is now essentially in its natural state with no wells, irrigation systems, roads, or other developments. It doesn't even have a fence. The neighboring ranchers are, however, willing to pay you a small sum of

money for the privilege of grazing their cattle on the land. To you, this money is essentially free; you receive it even though you have expended no capital and no significant amount of labor. In gathering this money, you are not contributing to the economic system but siphoning off some of the other ranchers' productivity by charging them your small fee. The only reason you are able realize these gains is because the institution of private property allows you to control access to that particular tract of land in a manner that is not fundamentally different from Schiller's feudal lord. The feudal lord would have used brute force directly while you would depend on socio-cultural norms and the violence of the state to keep control of that parcel of space.

Ricardo subtly but profoundly re-frames the theory of rent in a way that plants the seeds for both the "marginal revolution" of the mid-nineteenth century (Foley 2006, 62) and the neo-classical concept of rent. Notably, he moves away from using the phrases "rent of land" and "ground rent" and begins to refer to "rent" as a stand-alone term. This shift is visible in his initial definition of the concept: "Rent is that portion of the produce of the earth, which is paid to the landlord for the use of the original and indestructible powers of the soil" (Ricardo 1817, 33). He does the same in a later articulation: "Rent is the sum paid to the landlord for the use of the land, and for the use of the land only" (Ricardo 2016, 34). Although he is for the most part concerned with the rent that is earned on agricultural land and mines, the fact that he is using "rent" as a one-word term already suggests that his concept is broader than that of Smith.

Ricardo argued that the level of rent generated by given piece of land was defined by its productivity relative to the most *marginal* piece of land – the piece of land that lay exactly on the threshold of economic viability. A farm on that piece of land would not generate rent since all the revenue of the farm would go to wages and profits. In the absence of rent, the owners of the

land would be indifferent to bringing it into production. More productive land would generate

revenue above the costs of labor and capital and so the owners of these plots would earn

incrementally surplus revenue in relation to the marginal piece of land. That incremental surplus

is the rent. In conceiving of rent in this way, Ricardo defines rent in terms of an opportunity

cost; it becomes the gains earned in relation to the next best option – in relation to *what would

have been*. Although Ricardo's insights were already implicit in Smith's work, his explication

of them radically transforms rent into a subjunctive concept. The landless farmer would

therefore rarely earn more than wages, which is the primary reason that Ricardo was so

concerned with the topic of rent (Foley 2006, 78). On both sides of the equation, the value

received above the threshold of worthwhile-ness is now what defines "rent."

The Later Classical Association Between Rent and Surplus in Nassau Senior and J.S. Mill:

Nassau William Senior was another economist of the early nineteenth century who helped free

the concept of rent from its connection to land and natural resources. Even though his major

treatise (Senior 1854) was written several decades before the marginal revolution, it nevertheless

exhibits some of the most important aspects of the modern, neo-classical view of rent. Taking

the insights of Smith and Ricardo in a Benthamite direction, Senior rejects the labor theory of

value and adopts a utilitarian perspective (Senior 1854, 6). He also makes the profoundly

important move of associating rent with the much broader notion of "surplus." In so doing, he

exemplifies the profound shift in the concept of rent that occurs over the course of the twentieth

century. More importantly for our purposes, he individualizes the concept in such a way as to

obscure sociality in a whole new way.

While he continues with the basic idea that rent is a something-for-nothing exchange, or, as he puts it, "recompense for no sacrifice" (Senior 1854, 89), he does not see land as the only or even the most common source of rent. For him, land is not itself a factor of production but rather just an instance of a "natural agent," which he defines negatively as "every productive agent so far as it does not derive its power from the act of man" (Senior 1854, 58). Senior takes this expansive notion of rent's source and combines it with Ricardo's insight that rent is a benefit above a threshold of worthwhile-ness. In the process, he he createss an association between rent and surplus:

> But the assistance of an Appropriated Natural Agent may render possible the production of a commodity more valuable than the result of equal labour and abstinence [i.e., capital] without such assistance. Such a commodity sells for a price exceeding the sum of the wages and profits which are sufficient to repay the capitalist and the labourer who have been employed on it. The *surplus* is taken by the proprietor of the natural agent, and is his reward, not for having laboured or abstained [i.e., made investments] but simply for not having withheld what he was able to withhold; for having permitted the gifts of nature to be accepted (Senior 1854, 90 emphasis added).

Consistent with Smith and Ricardo, Senior sees the basic form of the rent relationship to be one in which an owner derives a benefit from their power to grant permission to use some sort of natural resource (broadly defined). Unlike them, he abstracts this particular benefit into the category of "surplus." Senior does not provide an explicit definition of "surplus," but it is clear that his concept differs substantially from that of the classical economists and the the Marxists. Classical economists see surplus as the amount of material produce that is in excess of what a person needs to live (Smith 1976, 26; Ricardo 1817, 56, 224); it this surplus that allows exchange and the accumulation of capital. Marx's concept of "surplus value," on the other hand, was very specifically defined as the difference between the use-value and the exchange-value of

labor (Marx 1976, 300). Senior does not hold these views and it is clear that his view of both

rent and surplus is far more broad and abstract:

> . . . if wages and profit are to be considered as the rewards of peculiar sacrifices, the former the remuneration for labor, and the latter for abstinence from immediate enjoyment, it is clear that under the term 'rent' must be included all that is obtained without any sacrifice; or, which is the same thing, *beyond the remuneration for that sacrifice*; all that nature or fortune bestows either without any exertion on the part of the recipient, or in addition to the average remuneration for the exercise of industry or the employment of capital (Senior 1854, 91–92).

In arguing that "rent" must include *all* that is obtained "without any sacrifice" and in specifying

that this includes benefits that are beyond the average remuneration of a given sacrifice, Senior

has made the key modification to the fundamental Ricardian insight that allows it to extend

beyond land and natural resources alone but to any thing or situation that yields a "surplus."

Here is what he says about the relationship between rent and profit:

> . . . we term *rent* what might, with equal correctness, be termed fortuitous profit. We mean the surplus advantages which are sometimes derived from the employment of capital after making full compensation for all the risk that has been encountered, and all the sacrifices which have been made, by the capitalist. Such are the fortuitous profits of the holders of warlike stores on the breaking out of unexpected hostilities; or of the holders of black cloth on the sudden death of one of the Royal family. Such would be the additional revenue of an Anglesea miner, if, instead of copper, he should come on an equally fertile vein of silver. The silver would, without doubt, be obtained by means of labour and abstinence; but *they* would have been repaid by an equal amount of copper. The extra value of the silver would be the gift of nature, and therefore rent (Senior 1854, 130).

If Senior thinks that "fortuitous profits" and rent are essentially the same, then he is clearly

operating within a new conceptual framework that blurs the lines between the three fundamental

types of revenue. Adam Smith used a very similar example of black cloth sales during public

mourning ceremonies, but he nowhere indicated that the unexpectedly high returns might be

called "rent." Instead, he referred to them simply as "extraordinary profits" (Smith 1976, 67).

Ricardo, to my knowledge, does not address these sorts of ambiguous revenues at all.

As the nineteenth century progressed, economic theory continued to move in this direction. John Stuart Mill helped this movement by clarifying a point that was still quite ambiguous in Senior. The latter had not fully worked out the relationship between "recompense for no sacrifice" and the threshold of worthwhile-ness. Mill, by contrast, is very clear that the revenue that is above the threshold of worthwhile-ness, no matter how it was generated, is a reward beyond the sacrifices necessary to produce the good or service in question. Such additional revenues should therefore be seen as rent according to Mill. He is also more clear than Senior that the market is the force that determines the threshold. In the seventh (1870) edition of his *Principles of Political Economy,* Mill illustrates these points through a discussion of a firm that has achieved a cost-saving advantage over its competitors and hence a capacity to generate more revenues:

> The extra gains which any *producer or dealer* obtains through superior talents for business, or superior business arrangements, are very much of a similar kind. If all his competitors had the same advantages, and used them, the benefit would be transferred to their customers, through the diminished value of the article: he only retains it for himself because he is able to bring his commodity to market at a lower cost, while its value is determined by a higher. *All advantages, in fact, which one competitor has over another, whether natural or acquired, whether personal or the result of social arrangements, bring the commodity, so far, into the Third Class* [the rent-yielding class]*, and assimilate the possessor of the advantage to a receiver of rent.* Wages and profits represent the universal elements in production, while rent may be taken to represent the differential and peculiar: any difference in favour of certain producers, or in favour of production in certain circumstances, being the source of a gain, which, though not called rent unless paid periodically by one person to another, is governed by laws entirely the same with it (Mill 1909, 476–77 emphasis added).

He is saying first and foremost that it does not matter how a business got its advantage; if it is earning something more than its competitors, then it is receiving rent. In specifying that it

makes no difference whether this advantage is "natural or acquired," he is suggesting that the "extra gains" that might stem from some technological or otherwise productivity-raising innovation should also be called rent. Such extra gains would exist contingently, in relation to what the rest of the market was doing and would have little or nothing to do with "gifts of nature."

Despite their differences, the world portrayed by Smith, Ricardo, Senior and Smith Senior and Smith is a world populated by *homo economicus*. All of them portray society as a collection of discrete individuals who happen to exchange things with one another. Land ownership presents a challenge to this worldview because it is complexly tied to virtually all other social relationships. One cannot consider the institution of land ownership without also considering governance, social norms, authority, familial relationships, etc. The concept of rent forces Smith to raise the question of land ownership and he catcheses a fleeting glimpse of its sociality, but no more than a glimpse. But the concept of "rent" also allows him to contain and tame the sociality associated with land ownership by whittling it down to a simple relationship of exchange: wealth for permission. So reduced, land ownership becomes domesticated into Smith's ideological fantasy such that he can stop further inquiry into sociality and continue with his theory of exchanging individuals. Having avoided the relatively easy question of land ownership, he can also avoid the more difficult question of ownership in general and thus of sociality in general. The concept of rent thus allows Smith to quell the disturbance posed by the sociality of ownership and thus defends the fantasy world of *homo economicus*.

The Neo-classical View as Represented by Alfred Marshall

In expanding the concept of rent in this way, Mill anticipates an argument made much more thoroughly by Alfred Marshall, one of the leaders of the marginal revolution. In his extremely influential textbook, the first edition of which was published in 1890, he too characterizes the additional income generated by an advantage in the marketplace as rent and rent as a form of surplus. In the following passage the pleasure of labor, producer's surplus and rent are all seen in the same light:

> It has already been noticed that when a man is fresh and eager, [labor][labor] really costs him nothing. For, as some socialists have urged with pardonable exaggeration, few able; people know how much they enjoy moderate work, till something occurs to prevent them from working altogether. But rightly or wrongly, most persons believe that the greater part of the work which they do, when earning their living, yields them no surplus of pleasure; but on the contrary costs them something. They are glad when the hour for stopping arrives: perhaps they forget that the earlier hours of their work have not cost them as much as the last: they are rather apt to think of nine hours' work as costing them nine times as much as the last hour; and it seldom occurs to them to think of themselves as reaping a *producer's surplus or rent,* through being paid for every hour at a rate sufficient to compensate them for the last, and most distressing hour (Marshall 2013, 438, emphasis added)

First, let us note that Marshal considers the words "surplus" and "rent" to be synonyms. And how does a laborer earn a "producer's surplus or rent?" In Marshal's framework, laborers are paid enough to keep them at work for the last and most unpleasant hour of their work day, but, because they are paid this "ninth hour" wage for all nine hours that they work, they are being paid *more* for those first eight hours than what is actually needed to make them show up to work. They are, according to this neo-classical logic, earning a surplus utility for the first eight hours of each day, and, because "surplus" and "rent" are the same for Marshal, the laborers are earning a rent on their labor! No conceptualization of rent could have have been more foreign to Adam

Smith.

As with Mill, it does not particularly matter to Marshall whether or not additional revenue comes from control over some natural resource or not (Marshall 2013, 413). If a firm's advantage raises its remuneration above the minimum that it would take to cover *all* its costs, including interest and the wages of management, and its opportunity costs – the benefits that could be gained in another activity – then it counts as a rent. If, in other words, a firm is earning anything more than the minimum that it would take to continue its business, then it is earning rent.

As we try to picture this, we should recall Ricardo's analysis of the rent of agricultural land. For him, the level of rent earned by all farms is determined by the least productive plot of land that is still worth bringing into production. Any land that is more productive than this marginal or threshold tract would be earning rent. If prices were to fall, then the marginal lands would be idled while the more productive lands would be generating less rent. Under the logic of Mill and Marshall, the same would be true in the markets of just about any commodity. The least efficient producer who manages to stay in business demonstrates (to observers) how much rent the more advantaged or productive firms are earning.

This of course raises questions regarding supply and competition. A key element in making something a possible source of rent is that it is not reproducible by human activity, that is to say, its supply is either fixed or at least uncontrollable by market actors. If the would-be source of rent can be created by people, then competitors would do so by deploying capital and its price would quickly return to its threshold of worthwhile-ness. While Senior had expanded the idea of rent to include fortuitous profits – see above – he was still thinking of lucky

circumstances that can't be recreated by new entrants into the market, or at least not quickly

enough to capture the rent (think of the black cloth example). Mill and Marshall have changed

the concept in such a way that non-reproducibility is not a definitive factor in rent. If market

actors are earning remuneration beyond what it would take to keep them engaged in their

activities, then they are earning rent. So, in their theories (esp. Marshall's), rent can be earned on

capital investments under a broad range of circumstances (Marshall 2013, 358).

It is only possible for them to think in this way because they have factored in time

whereas Senior had not. If rent is recompense for no sacrifice, then there is no good reason for

the extraordinary gains resulting from an innovation or a clever strategy not to be considered rent

rather than "extraordinary profits." Such gains would be temporary, but the rent generated by

tracts of farmland also vary with time. Indeed, Marshall argues that the incentives in agricultural

markets are quite similar to those found in manufacturing and other sectors in which the means

of production can be increased. To review the Ricardian scenario yet again, landowners who are

blessed with high agricultural prices will be earning high rents. They will first seek to get as

much out of their existing land as possible but, as they encounter diminishing returns on their

new investments, they (or others) will soon expand into new lands with the hope of realizing

even more total rent. As this process proceeds, total supply will increase, prices will fall, and the

older plots of land will yield less rent. The quest for rent drives new production; its loss,

however, does not diminish existing production and this is one aspect that makes rent very

different from profit. Much the same is true of manufactured production, Marshall argues:

> . . . when we are considering the causes which determine normal prices for a period
> which is short relatively to that required for largely increasing the supply of those
> appliances for production [i.e. capital goods]; then their influence on value is

chiefly indirect and more or less similar to that exerted by the free gifts of nature. The shorter the period which we are considering, and the slower the process of production of those appliances, the less part will variations in the income derived from them play in checking or increasing the supply of the commodity produced by them, and in raising or lowering its supply price (Marshall 2013, 414).

The owner of a factory might find the price of her product suddenly increasing and thus find herself taking in revenues well above the normal returns she had been making. The high prices will inspire her and her competitors to invest more resources in their existing machines by, for example, spending more on labor, fuel, resources, and repairs to get more product out of them. If prices stay high, they will eventually purchase new capital goods as the old machines reach their margin of diminishing returns. As supply increases and prices decline, those extraordinary revenues will also decline. While this cycle will happen more quickly among manufactured goods than among agricultural goods, and while it is more likely that the extraordinary revenues will fall completely to zero, the basic dynamic between manufactured items and "gifts of nature" is only different with respect to the time horizon. Given this fact, reasons Marshall, revenue generated by capital goods that rises above the normal threshold of worthwhile-ness should also be treated as a form of rent. Marshall uses the term, *quasi-rent* (Marshall 2013, xxi) to describe this specific form of rent that is derived from existing or short-term capital investments. The important point is that quasi-rents will have the same effect on behavior as true rents – their appearance will spur investment and attract competitors, but their absence will not change the actions of extant producers because they would simply stay at the threshold of worthwhile-ness.

Marshall does not argue that true rents, quasi-rents, and profits are all the same, but he prefers to see them as different portions of a continuum rather than completely distinct entities. He argues that "there is no sharp line of division" between them and that "each group shades into

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the other gradually"" (Marshall 2013, xxi). Such a theory is consistent with his move to

marginalism, which is, as he says, based on a "Principle of Continuity" (ibid, xx). The difference

at the extreme ends of the continuum, in Marshall's argument, is not so different from that of his

predecessors: a true rent can only be earned on something of fixed supply, (e.g., a natural

resource (ibid, 341). In practice, he argues it is usually impossible to distinguish between a fixed

natural resource like a tract of a tract of land and a capital good like a machine because on the

one hand, most existing sources of natural resources, like agricultural land, have generations of

human modifications already in them while, on the other hand, there are plenty of unused

resources whose revenues would be determined only by the new capital applied to them (ibid,

121, 341). When this observation is combined with his argument that the supply of capital goods

is often effectively fixed in the short term, we come to understand why he believes that there are

many phenomena that behave like rent even though they don't involve fixed supplies and many

other phenomena that do involve fixed supplies but don't behave like pure rent. Because of this

belief, Marshall holds as a central doctrine that a rent-earning item of fixed supply should not be

seen "as a thing by itself but rather as the leading species of a large genus" (xxi).

Marxists saw general surplus in a similar light and defined "surplus value" as the

difference between the use-value and the exchange-value of labor – the amount of labor that

workers contribute to the the production process that is in excess of the value of their wages.[9] As

a utilitarian, Marshall is interested in neither excess material goods nor excess labor time but in

excess satisfaction. Marshall argues that "the price which a person pays for a thing can never

exceed, and seldom comes up to that which he would be willing to pay rather than go without it"

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[9] See page 300 of first volume of *Capital* (Marx 1976).

(Marshall 2013, 103). The purchase of a good or service thus usually results in a "surplus of satisfaction" (ibid.). He goes on to write: "The excess of the price which he would be willing to pay rather than go without the thing, over that which he actually does pay, is the economic measure of this surplus satisfaction. It may be called *consumer's surplus*" (ibid.). A producer's surplus is defined in much the same way, as remuneration for a productive activity that exceeds the minimum required to keep the person or firm engaged in that particular business (ibid., 117). Although he is careful to say that the theory of surplus is not identical to the theory of rent (ibid., 130), he does declare both forms of surplus to be forms of rent (ibid., 345, 387). Doing so is consistent with his broader theory and the ways in which he is teasing out the implications of his predecessor's ideas. If rent is recompense for no sacrifice, it is perfectly logical and consistent to argue that any perceived satisfaction beyond what it would take for a person to continue in any activity is a form of rent, even if the activity in question is an act of consumption.   Marshall, it appears, was trying to distill rent down to an apparent essence, an irreducible principle, which was this: rent is utility received by at least one party of an exchange that is beyond what it would need to engage in the exchange.

In taking these steps, Marshall has essentially brought us to the contemporary conception of "economic rent." As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this is the place at which rent becomes virtually indistinguishable from economic profits and better-than-average wages. While economic rent is often mistakenly referred to as Paretian rent (Bird and Tarascio 1992), and while the precise parameters of it have been debated (e.g., Wessel 1967; Worcester 1946), textbooks and reference guides nevertheless quite consistently treat economic rent in this way. One frequently reprinted textbook describes economic rent with reference to resources of fixed

supply (i.e., having a perfectly inelastic supply curve) like land, calling it a "*surplus,* that is a payment which is not necessary to ensure that [the resource] will be available to the economy as a whole" (McConnell 1975, 635). The book then notes that surpluses can occur in wages too, using the example of star athletes who would be willing to play their sports at far lower salaries than they typically command (ibid). The Penguin Dictionary of Economics defines economic rent as "the difference between a return made a by a factor of production and the return necessary to keep the factor in its current occupation" (Bannock, Baxter, and Davis 1998, 121). A more contemporary textbook defines it simply as "payment in excess of opportunity cost" (Arnold 2008, p. 631). Samuelson and Nordhaus, meanwhile, avoid a specific definition of economic rent but associate it with payments to resources in fixed supply (Samuelson and Nordhaus 1989, 559) and note that the loss of rent (to a tax) does not change economic behavior (ibid., 560, 668), indicating that they too see it as form of surplus (i.e., a producer surplus). Gordon Tollisson, a very prominent theorist of *rent seeking* defined rent in this way: "a return in excess of a resource owner's opportunity cost" (Tollison 1982, 575). In all these definitions, it must be noted, a "resource" is defined broadly enough to include labor and capital goods as well as natural resources. So the contemporary concept does tend to attach itself to producers rather than consumers, a fact which probably has to do with the fact that consumer surpluses are generally seen as efficiencies whereas producer surpluses are generally seen as the inefficiencies (with some qualifications that will be mentioned below). Both, to reiterate my earlier point, have the same underlying relationship with rent: the receipt of a benefit from an economic activity that is in excess of what it would otherwise take to keep a person engaged in that activity.

Whatever its precise framing, this new conceptualization of rent has a radical difference

contained within its appearance of continuity. In the genealogical development that I have outlined thus far, each theorist sees himself as pointing out the limitations or contradictions of the earlier theorists. To a large extent, each is correct and thus Marshall's concept of rent, it can be argued, was laying latent within Smith's concept. To review, Smith saw rent of land as a *deduction* from wages. That is, rent of land was an unreciprocated wealth transfer made possible by land ownership and this quality made it different from wages which were seen as reciprocal transfers of products of labor for other products of labor, that is, exchanges, which themselves tended toward equivalence when measured in labor-time. In comparing the classical view of rent (as a one-sided transfer in the context of reciprocal exchanges) to the neoclassical view (as a surplus of satisfaction with respect an opportunity cost), one can discern a continuity. We have already noted that both concepts are concepts are about earning something from nothing. For classical economists the "something" is the products of labor whose value is measured in labor-time; the "nothing" is *access* to land which has no value measurable in labor-time. For neo-classical economists, the "something" is utility received in exchange; the "nothing" is the fact that the amount of utility the person is currently getting is greater than what is needed to keep the person engaged in the exchange. It is important to note that the neo-classical sense of an equivalent exchange would be one in that happens precisely at the opportunity cost associated with the next best option, that is, one that happens precisely at its threshold of worthwhileness. Given this, it can be said that both schools are describing a form of unbalanced or unequal exchange measured against the possibility of equivalence. For the one school, the hypothetical measurement is made in labor; for the other, it is made in utility.

Marshall believed that he was essentially distilling the distinctive aspect of "rent of land"

down to its essence (Marshall 2013, 641). We expect the process of distilling to be one of abstraction and Marshall's concept is indeed more abstract than Smith's, Ricardo's and even Senior's. His definition is more conceptually precise and more widely applicable but also less connected to any particularly human institution or relationship. For Smith and Ricardo, "rent of land" was an amalgam of existing human practices, primarily contract-rent agreements and land ownership. They were at least partially aware that these were historical contingencies – relationships created by humans. So, "rent of land" describes a relationship that is interconnected to other human relationships: it is a transfer of products of labor from those who exchange the products of their own labor (wage-earners) to those whom society recognizes as landowners (rent-earners). Contrast this to Marshall's conceptualization of rent as the surplus of satisfaction that one receives in comparison to an opportunity cost; so conceived, rent is essentially an experiential phenomenon, one that could be experienced by virtually any choice making entity. Indeed, taking the concept to its logical extreme, it could be argued that chimpanzees experience such a surplus when they choose to forage for one fruit over another. It would not even be much of a stretch to argue that self-driving cars and automated stock trading computers experience such surpluses as their algorithms guide them to one choice over another. But even if one refrains from taking the concept to these extremes, one still finds that the concept does not situate rent in any specific set of institutions or social social relationships: capitalists, consumers and workers can all earn rent. Whether one is receiving one's something-from-nothing because of an extraordinary talent, a cost-saving innovation, a monopoly privilege, or a great love of one's job, it's all considered "rent" by neo-classical economists. And this great variety of phenomena can be categorized under the same rubric precisely because "rent" in neo-

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classical economics no longer designates a relationship between people, nor even a relationship between things (*pace* Marx) but rather a relationship between two *contingent states of affairs* and*,* to be more specific, two contingent experiences that are internal to an individual economic actor – between the benefit one actually received and the benefit one would have received had one chosen the next best option. *The Penguin Dictionary of Ecomomics,* for instance, uses the example of a brain surgeon who would earn only 1/10th as much in his next best employment option as a nurse (Bannock, Baxter, and Davis 1998, 121). Such an example only makes sense when one considers the situation of a very particular doctor who would face such choices. In neo-classical hands, we see that rent pertains to the experience of the individual economic agent and describes the relationship between what did happen and what *might have* happened.

In transforming the concept in this way, the neo-classical economists are performing a very different kind of abstraction than their classical forebears. The classical economists were abstracting their way *into* a social theory, or at least a proto-social one, whereas neo-classical economists were (and still are) abstracting their way *out of* the same. Readers will undoubtedly call to mind Marx's argument that classical political economists reduced the relationship between people to the relationship between things (Marx 1976, 165), denying the sociality of economic relationships in the process in the process. But the thrust of his critique was aimed at the capitalist system itself rather than political economists' writings about that system. In other words, he was saying that our actually existing process of commodity exchange is what has taken on the appearance of a relationship between things, not our theoretical representations of it. Regarding the ideological framework of economists, Polanyi's argument is more relevant: by treating wealth creation as a systemic process between large groups of people, the classical

economists laid the groundwork for the "discovery of society" (Polanyi 1975). While it is true that the fundamental unit of analysis was the individual, and thus the theories of Smith, Ricardo and their colleagues were not fully social in the manner of Rousseau, Hegel, Marx or Durkheim, it is still true that when they used categories like "commodities," "labor," "wages," "profit," "rent" and the like, they were making generalizations about the myriad of actually-existing human artifices and activities. The name "exchange" was given to the regular and reciprocal transfers made by humans. The myriad of different things exchanged in this process, were dubbed "commodities." The uncountable types of activity that create such commodities, were all all named "labor." However simplistically rendered, each term was describing an earthly, observable, human reality. For this same reason, the categories had a certain amount of fuzziness; among the precious few of us that have spent any significant time reading classical economics, who has not furrowed their brow trying to figure out exactly why a wage or a profit in one particular situation would not count as rent in some other situation and vice versa? These were qualitative concepts, not terribly different from the "ideal types" that would later be found among Weberian sociologists; they were not meant to have the analytical purity required for mathematical models. As neo-classical economics turned rent into a relationship between two contingent possibilities, they made it abstract enough for such mathematical operations. In the very same stroke, they also made it into a matter of the singular agent's experience.

If neo-classical economists solve the vagueness problem of rent, they replace it with a problem of over-extension. One twentieth century economist defines rent in this way: "returns above and beyond what the recipients could achieve in a competitive market" (Zeckhauser 1982). Such a conception of rent, as we have already seen, can be found in practically any

situation: from the earnings of great monopolies to the wages of the most humble employees to the joys of cheap consumption. The lines between the distinctive form of gain known as "rent" - "recompense for no sacrifice" - and other kinds of gain become so blurred that a prominent theorist of *rent seeking* was able to treat rent and profit as virtually identical: "So long as the owners of resources prefer more to less, they are likely to be engaged in rent seeking, which is simply another word for profit seeking" (J. M. Buchanan 1980, 3). Being indistinguishable from profit, rent could now also be seen as something that provided a good incentive for innovation, increased productivity and efficient outcomes in the long run – that is, as a part of Schumpeter's process of "creative destruction."

But a problem arises: how does one distinguish this sort of gain from the excess gains obtained by monopolies, corrupt officials or even criminal enterprises? These forms of gain are clearly recompense for no sacrifice, they are clearly forms of rent, but nobody believes that they lead to any sort of desirable or efficient outcome. This problem is particularly important for members of the Austrian and the (old) Chicago schools of economics who see collective bargaining, tariffs, and most government interventions as forms of rent-earning that lead to inefficient outcomes. How, if rent is just a surplus, does one describe their problematic nature? The broadness of the neo-classical conception of rent thus generates a need for a distinction between good and bad forms of rent.

My examination of late eighteenth and nineteenth century theories of rent leaves out many important voices, including those of Johann von Thunen, Herman Gossen, Henry George and Joseph Schumpeter. As mentioned, this account of rent in Anglo-American thought is not meant to be an intellectual history but rather a genealogy that analyzes the transition of the

concept of rent as in unfolded over as in unfolded over a few influential texts. The purpose has

not been to account for every economist who influenced the thinking on rent bur rather to

provide some context for contemporary theories and to illustrate the way that the concept

functions within the broader ideological fantasy of capital.

Natural vs. Artificial Rent in the Theory of Rent-seeking

The distinction between beneficial and pernicious forms of rent took shape in the late sixties and

early seventies with the development of the theory of rent seeking behaviorr (Tullock 1967;

Krueger 1974). One rent seeking theorist, James Buchanan, quite literally distinguishes between

"good" and "bad" rents, where the good rents are those that result in an aggregate surplus and the

bad are those that result in aggregate waste (Buchanan 1980, 4). In a similar vein, Robert

Tollison created a distinction between natural and artificial rents. He argued that some rents

arise "*naturally* from the price system" (Tollison 1982, 575); these would include most of the

forms we have been discussing: temporary market advantages, locational advantages, unique

personal qualities (e.g., talent), etc. "The pursuit of rents under these [free market]

circumstances," according to Tollison, "is the sense in which rent seeking is equivalent to profit

seeking" (ibid). He continues, however, to say that, "[r]ents can also be contrived *artificially,*

through, for example, government action" (ibid). Natural rents are seen to be beneficial or at

least harmless because the competitive pursuit of them either raises the supply of the thing

generating the rent or creates new alternatives to it. Both processes would result in more desired

goods and services for the economy.

       Artificial rents, however, are seen to be problematic because the economic process of

trying to capture the artificial rents creates "deadweight losses" in the economy (Krueger 1974, 301). Various kinds of governments actions, like, for instance, for instance, granting licenses for a particular kind of business, give a competitive advantage and thus a rent to certain people within the economy. The concern is not only that certain economic actors will capture this rent but also that many more people will devote considerable resources to legal and illegal activities aimed at getting the government to create a favorable regulation system, tariff structure, licensing process, etc. These activities might include lobbying, political gift giving, campaign support on the legal side and bribery, corruption, smuggling and black marketeering on the illegal side (Krueger 1974, 291). Such activities and whatever goods and services are associated with them, according to this line of thinking, are wasteful because no one in the economy would desire them in the absence of governmental action, which, unlike that of other economic actors, is backed up by the force of state state violence (Buchanan 1980; Krueger 1974; Tullock 1967; Tollison 1982). Such activities, in other words, do not represent genuinely voluntary exchanges.

This conception of artificial or bad rent leads to a justification of small government. In the words of James Buchanan:

> So long as governmental action is restricted largely, if not entirely, to protecting individual rights, personal and property, and enforcing voluntarily negotiated private contracts, the market process dominates economic behavior and ensures that any economic rents that appear will be dissipated by the forces of competitive entry. Furthermore, the prospects of economic rents enhance the dynamic process of development, growth and orderly change. If, however, governmental action moves significantly beyond the limits defined by the minimal or protective state, if government commences, as it has done on a sweeping scale, to interfere piecemeal in the market adjustment process, the tendency toward the erosion or dissipation of rents is countered and may be wholly blocked (Buchanan 1980, 8–9).

To briefly summarize: the rent-seeking theorists view rent as a form of surplus and thus as something that is not fundamentally different from profit or other kinds of gain; however, these

thinkers also believe that a distinction can be made between natural or good rents and artificial or bad rents. Good rents are those that one expects to find in a free market; they are usually temporary and serve as a useful incentive to increasing the overall amount of consumer surplus. Bad rents are associated with government interventions in the market. Such interventions tend to generate long-term rents for certain economic actors, which are not only problematic in and of themselves but also cause those actors to divert substantial resources to the process of obtaining the rents (lobbying, etc.); this latter process generates goods and services that no end-use consumers desire. It is to this process that the term "rent seeking behavior" refers. Bad rents thus incentivize economic waste and disincentivize useful innovation as economic actors spend their resources trying to obtain or maintain an advantage that allows their current production process to generate a surplus (i.e., the rent). Rent capture and rent seeking thus result in more welfare costs to the economy than would otherwise be necessary.

Because they have defined "good" rent as that which is generated by voluntary market exchange and virtually everything else as "bad" rent, it is easy to understand why this group of thinkers used the concept of rent seeking behavior to argue against interventionist government policies in both the developed and developing worlds. This conceptual framework also provides an ostensibly value neutral way of analyzing the behaviors of organized crime. Rather than decrying unfairness, economists can point to diminished welfare and reduced efficiency.

The genealogy of rent that I provided above is relevant to the study of the economic practices of Delhi's garbage collectors because these are the tools that classical, neo-classical and even Marxist economic thought would use to criticize and ban such practices. Each informal garbage collector, for example, "owns" a client list and has this ownership enforced by other

members of the caste. While less rigorous detractors would simply condemn these practices as coercive and monopolistic, economists would provide a deeper account of their harm: they constitute rent capture and rent seeking and thereby reduce the total utility in the economy. Such economists would say, in other words, that the economic practices of the garbage collectors cause economic inefficiency because they involve both rent capture and rent seeking. Moreover, they would see the activities of both the informal workers and the formal unionized workers as essentially the same – as just two different strategies of obtaining *bad* rent.

Domesticating the Threat of Transparently Social Wealth

The main argument of this chapter is that the economists' concept of rent domesticates the complex social phenomena involved in transparently social wealth by bringing it into their familiar world of *homo economicus*. I have already mentioned that the economic practices of the Balmikis challenge the bourgeois ideal of the state from both above below and that both the illegal anti-market practices of the disenfranchised Balmikis and the legal political machinations of their more established caste mates constitute transparently social wealth. What remains to be shown is exactly how this process of domestication occurs.

Marx's historicized views of rent and property can offer some insight into this process. Marx writes that "[t]o try to give a definition of property as an independent relation, a separate category, an abstract and eternal idea, can only be an illusion of metaphysics or of jurisprudence'"" (Marx 1920, 168). Economists from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman agree that private property is human artifice but, unlike mainstream economists, Marx also thinks that ownership only becomes a distinct and discrete relationship within capitalist society itself (ibid.). In other modes of social organization, the control of things (land or chattel) is a social

relationship that cannot be disentangled from a great many other social relationships (See also: Marx 1976, 170).

In his discussion of rent, Marx is heavily concerned with the fact that capitalism reduces land into just another commodity and land ownership into a relationship of mere commodity movement. He writes that the legal conception of capitalist private property "means nothing more than that the landowner can behave in relation to the land just as any commodity owner can with his commodities . . . " (Marx 1993, 753). That is to say, landowners in capitalism can dispose of their land in more or less any way they choose, something that is not possible in other modes of production. As capitalism develops, he goes on to say, any alternative form of ownership such as "feudal landed property, clan property or small peasant property with the mark community is transformed into the economic form corresponding to [the capitalist] mode of production . . . " (ibid 754). This transformation is a process of reducing the social complexity of property as it is found in other modes of production:

> Landed property thus receives its purely economic form by the stripping away of all its former political embellishments and admixtures, in short all those traditional accouterments that are denounced as uselessly and absurdly superfluous by the industrial capitalists themselves, and by their theoretical spokesmen, in their passionate struggle with landed property . . . (Marx 1993, 755)

If other modes of production tended to combine land ownership with "political embellishments and admixtures," the capitalist mode of production is unique in that it reduces land ownership to the relationship of exchange and nothing but exchange. To be clear, Marx is here discussing experiential realities of capitalist society; he is arguing that this actually is a relationship of mere exchange (money exchanged for permission). In distilling this exchange to a single revenue, the term "ground-rent" is then an accurate representation of landlord-renter relationship in capitalist

society.

Other forms of social organization might not yield to land possession a revenue at all or, at least, nothing that we would recognize as such. While all conceivable modes of social organization would require some degree of control of land, not all would do so in a way that establishes the institution we call "property." Others, such as the feudal mode, would have institutions that superficially resemble our notion of landed property but actually entail a very different relationship between "renter" and "landlord" than that of capitalism. The social arrangement that allowed the elites to control land also gave them substantial power to compel and control people (Marx 1993, 928). So, for example, the payment made by a *villein* to a medieval English lord entailed not only obligations to work on the lord's land but also to pay him obeisance, to stay within his manor, to patronize his seignorial monopolies, to have marriages and sales approved by him, to abide by his legal judgments, etc. (Bloch 1961, 145–208; Gies and Gies 1990, 76, 150). The lords' power over the peasants was far from absolute, however, because their tenancy came with customary and heritable rights (Marx 1993, 930). Such rights of the peasants were just some of many institutions and norms that constrained the economic activities of the nobility, who did not hold their land as commodities in the modern sense. Isolating the rent payment from all these other relationships is thus meaningless because it is just one part of a social system that is suffused with relations of control. Indeed, one can safely say that, under feudal relations, the control of land is virtually identical to the control of people.

Under capitalist relations, this identity is severed, and it is precisely the severance that allows ground-rent to come into existence. In bourgeois-capitalist relations, people are forbidden from exerting positive control over one another in public, unless they are specially authorized

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members of the state – the sole and exceptional entity that is allowed to exert such control. Ownership meanwhile becomes confined to land and chattel and a few exceptional state creations like intellectual property. The power conferred to citizens by this ownership, moreover, becomes nearly total in so far as owners can dispose of their property in almost any way they choose. The power to enforce the rules of this new form of property is meanwhile transferred completely to the state, which now gains a monopoly on the positive control of people and casts itself as an entity existing outside of and above the affairs of "the people." Capitalist relations also give negative power a new significance. Ownership in capitalist relations includes the almost unlimited right to exclude others from use of one's property, meaning that people can now routinely exert negative control over one another through their property even if they are forbidden from exerting direct, positive control over one another. Because of its negative quality, the social control entailed in capitalist ownership appears phenomenologically secondary, a kind of afterthought. As an owner in capitalism, I do not exert power over *you,* I exert power over my property; if I exclude you from it, it is because I am controlling my property, not you. So, if, in feudalism, the relations between people were suffused with social control, of which land ownership was just one indistinct aspect, in capitalism, ownership becomes the one relation of control that is allowed to exist between citizens. This power relation is not, however experienced as a power relationship between the citizens themselves but as one between the individual citizens and the things they own. Under such a set of conditions, the only relation that the controller of land can have with the one who seeks to use it is that of mere revenue. It is this set of relations, combined with the inevitable use of cash, that transforms the complex social relations into mere ground-rent. This transformation is part of the broader

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transformation that changes the gains of productive organization into mere profits and the gains of productive human activity into mere wages. It is, in other words, part of the ("great") transformation to capitalist society.

Marx's insights were, however, limited by their ultimately teleological framework. For Marx and many Marxists, questions regarding the relationship between capitalist and non-capitalist relations of production are usually taken up as questions of the "pre-history" of capital and of the "subsumption" of "precapitalist" relations into the processes of capital. Marx was not especially concerned with the ways in which non-capitalist relations could exist and even thrive within a society in which capitalist relations otherwise prevail. He also had little concern for the ways in which the presence of such relations might challenge the bourgeois ideas of property and the state that are used to understand capitalist relations. Marx was also failed to anticipate the ways in which later economists would expand the concept of rent into something so broad that it could easily be used to name and contain the gains made from these non-capitalist relations. Given that the project of this chapter is to critically negate the ways in which mainstream economists would label practices like proprietary livelihood, it must push past his theorization.

To get beyond the insights that Marx offered, we must analyze the precise relationship between ownership and rent as it exists in the work of the economists presented in this chapter. In any theory of rent, there has to be an agent that earns the rent and, within rent-seeking theory, this agent is the resource owner. Because the rent-seeking theorists have broadened the notion of rent into almost any type of surplus (i.e., surplus utility), the resource owner could be virtually any type of economic actor: a consumer whose resource is money, an entrepreneur whose resource is capital, a landlord whose resource is land and even a worker whose resource is a rare

skill. The concept of *bad* rent, however, requires the presence of another set of agents, agents such as government officials, criminals or others who control a resource that is not "economic" in the traditional sense. Their resource is instead the capacity to make force-backed interventions in the market. The people within this special category earn rent but also distribute rent-generating opportunities to other rent seekers in the economy. The power holder, whether a governmental official, criminal or otherwise, is thus central to rent seeking theory but, yet, this theory says very little about either the "resource" that such agents possess or the particular conditions under which they "own" it. This elision is no accident.

Rent-seeking theory sees government action and criminal action to be virtually identical in economic terms: both are seen as rent-yielding interventions into the domain of voluntary exchanges. Both are, moreover, seen as inefficient interventions that encourage otherwise undesired economic activity or inhibit otherwise desired economic activity. But the placement of government and criminal interventions on similar footing actually reveals something very important about the underlying conception of ownership. This is a concept of ownership that has to remain at the *first-order*, by which I mean it cannot include *the right to own property* as itself a thing that can be owned. To put it differently, this concept of ownership allows for the control of things owned but it does not allow for the control of the rights to control those rights. This latter arrangement would constitute a second-order relationship. If owning property is defined as having the socially and legally approved power to grant access to certain classes of objects, then this definition posits the possibility of having the power of granting access to the power to grant access – owning the ownership, if you will.

The examples of medieval English mills and bakeries that I provided in Chapter 3,

provide a good example. English peasants "owned" the grain that came from their own tracts of land in the sense that they could deny others access to it, but they were compelled by their local lords to take their grain to the mills of the manor and their flour to its bakeries (Bloch 1961, 251; Gies and Gies 1990, 150). The millers and the bakers would keep a customary amount of the grain and flour as payment and they, in turn, paid the lord who paid the lords above him. The peasants could not then deny those millers and bakers access to least some of their grain. The barons thus controlled *access to the access* of the grain, albeit in limited ways, and they could transfer this right to their children and others, although, again, within limits (Bloch 1961, 193). My point here is that in the context of proprietary livelihood, at least in medieval Europe, ownership of an asset was itself an asset to be owned.

Were property rights allowed to include second or higher orders of ownership, if there were to be an owner of ownership and an owner of that ownership and so on, the society would be indistinguishable from a feudalistic or tributary form of property in which each level of the hierarchy would grant to those below privileges such as tribute-collecting, tax farming, office selling, land transfer control, chartered monopoly rights and the like. In such a world, the socioeconomic system would run on rent to such a degree that it would not even make sense designate "rent" as a distinct form of income – indeed, I would contend that such conditions are the essence of the feudalistic/tributary mode of production. There can be multiple layers of ownership and it is the king, the sovereign, who occupies the top layer, but this leads to a profoundly parcelized and heterogeneous form of sovereignty. To remain what it is, bourgeois ownership must not slide into an infinite regression but must remain confined to a first-order relationship.

Within bourgeois ideology, however, somebody *does* in fact own ownership; that somebody is the nobody that we call "the state." Even advocates of the most minimalist forms of states (like Milton Friedman), still deem the state to be the entity that enforces the rules associated with ownership, contracting, etc. Moreover, they allot to it a monopoly on the use of legitimate violence (see for example: Friedman and Friedman 1962, 25). The state thus has the power to declare some transactions and property claims to be illegitimate, meaning ultimately that it has a power to control the access to others' control of access. The second order relationship thus exists even in this hyper liberal framework. Indeed, we can say that it is inescapable because once the possibility of controlling access exists, so too does the possibility of controlling access to the control of access. To prevent the growth of third and higher orders of the ownership relationship, which is to say, to prevent degeneration into parcelized and heterogeneous sovereignty, the state has to be a special kind of owner, a self-negating owner .

Allow me to explain this conception of the state as the owner of ownership a bit further. Even in a pro-market and pro-property nation like the United States, it is legally and socially acceptable for the government to seize citizens' property for failure to meet tax and other obligations.[10] This is an asymmetrical relationship as citizens cannot likewise seize the government's land. Courts are part of the government and, so, should a legal ruling dictate that some government property be handed over to a private citizen, the decision is still that of the government, as is the decision of when, where and how to follow through on the decision. Whatever American ideology might explicitly proclaim, all property belongs to the government in practice. This being said, it is not a major problem for liberal-capitalist ideology that the

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[10] See for example: https://www.illinoislegalaid.org/legal-information/what-happens-if-i-dont-pay-my-property-taxes#:~:text=In%20Illinois%2C%20homeowners%20pay%20property,the%20amount%20of%20taxes%20owed. Accessed 7/8/2024

government has this power as long as it exercises it in a homogeneous, non-discriminatory manner – by, for example, levying only flat income taxes and uniform sales taxes and tariffs. In confining itself to these kinds of interventions, the state avoids entering into voluntarily negotiated contracts thereby giving up its capacity to discriminate between different transactional partners. A state that treats everyone homogeneously in this manner – a "minimal or protective state" – is one that controls access to ownership and thus owns ownership but is at the same time *one that acts as if it does not have this power*. This self-negating quality of the ideal bourgeois state is exactly what allows it to have its homogeneous sovereignty – until it invokes its power of exception.

The opposition of the rent-seeking theorists to the interventionist state can now be seen in a new light. While they are overtly arguing that it promotes bad rent (and reduces efficiency, etc.), they are also tacitly arguing that acts of intervention make the state act like a full-fledged ordinary, self-affirming owner of property. Any expenditures by a state will affect some more than others but a minimally protective state keeps its expenditures to the minimum required to enforce bourgeois rules and so rent-seeking opportunities are also minimal. As soon as the state begins to expend resources on specific projects like infrastructure, healthcare, and housing, the heterogeneity of resource expenditures increases. This disparate benefit will not only accrue to some intended target, e.g., the poor, but to many collateral beneficiaries as well: construction workers, contractors, healthcare workers, financiers, etc. Meanwhile, there will undoubtedly be losers, including many taxpayers whose funds are being diverted to projects that are either irrelevant or even contrary to their interests. Likewise, tariffs, especially those that deliberately target particular kinds of goods will also have disparate benefits. All such heterogeneous

activities put the state into the higher orders of the property relationship, regardless of its intentions. Even when policy makers have the best of intentions in mind and are not deliberately making a deal with some private party in the economy, their actions will still have the structure of a voluntarily negotiated contract or a transaction. This causes the state to lose its self-negating quality and hence the homogeneity of its sovereignty.

So, the unspoken agenda contained within the rent seeking theorists' framework of good and bad rent is to cast and keep ownership as a first order relationship by casting and keeping the state as the non-owning owner of ownership. We have already seen how they themselves represent the division. To them, rent is not fundamentally different from other forms of economic surpluses. A surplus is good in their view – be it rent or some other kind – so long as it is obtained through voluntary exchanges, which is to say, by the rules of the free market. "Bad rent" designates a special kind of surplus that results from forceful interventions in the market (legal acts of "big government" were their primary concern but also illegal acts associated with crime and venality also count as bad rent). The pursuit of good rent, in their thinking, encourages the production of goods and services that people would want even if the rent collecting opportunity did not exist. The pursuit of bad rent, by contrast, encourages the production of goods and services for which there would otherwise be no demand; it is for this reason that bad rent is seen as inefficient and problematic. Government interventions are to be minimized precisely because they encourage the *pursuit* of bad rent. But, let us place their argument in the context of my argument that a non-interventionist state is a self-negating control of ownership (that is, an entity that controls access to ownership while acting as if it does not have such control): the tacit theory of the rent seeking theorists is that good rent is what occurs

when the state remains a self-negating owner, or, to put it another way, when it does not announce itself as an owner. Bad rent, on the other hand, occurs when the state *does* appear to the world as an owner of resources. So, while their explicit argument is that government intervention is inefficient because it promotes bad rent, their implicit argument is that the state must remain a self-negating entity lest it become a self-affirming one and undermine the entire regime of property on which market society is based. By the same logic, venality and criminality would also have to be understood as threats to the very essence of market society, not merely because they represent the pursuit of bad rent but also because they demonstrate the fragility of property as a first order relationship.

Economists can avoid confronting this fragility by reducing the complexity of social wealth to the incentives of individuals. The concept of rent allows them to avoid confronting the fact that wealth – all wealth – is an inherently collective and interactive process that transcends individuals; it does so by reducing that process to one that consists of nothing more than individuals chasing incentives. People engaged in proprietary livelihood, organized crime rings, acquiring government jobs and the like are all just pursuing the particular kind of gain called rent.

What I set out to do in this chapter was to head off economists at the metaphorical pass. If, as I have said, most the Balmiki's economic practices described in this dissertation consist of transparently social forms of wealth and if, as I have claimed, modern economists would see the gains from those forms of wealth as forms of rent, then it is important for us in anthropology to understand both what they are saying and what they might be missing. I have gone over how the classical notion of rent was associated with ill-gotten gains and how it was often seen as a

necessary evil that had to be tolerated in order to reap the benefits of private property. Because Smith and the other classical economists understood private property to be a human invention, they were semi-consciously using "rent" to name the wealth that was extorted through that invented relationship. I argued that the greatly expanded concept of rent that developed over the course of the nineteenth century continued be used as a descriptor of the wealth generated by sociality, if less consciously. I also argued that the practices associated with transparently social wealth are threats to the bourgeois ideological framework as a whole – including its ideal conception of the state. What the practices of transparently social wealth threaten to reveal is that all wealth in capitalism is intrinsically social even though it is structured in such way that no one experiences it this way. To reiterate my argument one last time: the application of the category "rent" to the revenues yielded by transparently social forms of wealth allows economists to reduce these supraindividualistic phenomena to ones in which individuals are simply pursuing an incentive. It is with the concept of rent, in other words, that economists are able to make the interactive complexity of sociality conform to an atomistic world populated by *homo economicus*.

Conclusion

This dissertation presents an ethnographic study of a series of anti-competitive practices that I discovered during the course of my fieldwork among sanitation workers and their caste mates in early twenty-first century Delhi. Those practices ranged from the relatively quiet and usually peaceful cartelization strategies of the door-to-door sanitation workers to the flamboyantly violent machinations of an organized crime leader. Most economists and political scientists would see these these anti-competitive practices as rent-extractive or rent-seeking behaviors. While it is undeniable that the practices in question were anti-competitive and rent-extractive in one way or another, I argue that these categories and the paradigm that supports them severely limit our understanding of the full context of their conduct.

The most prominent example of an anti-competitive practice that I described was the one that I called "proprietary livelihood." I described how the informal, door-to-door garbage collectors who worked in Delhi's middle class neighborhoods did not sell their labor on a market but rather owned exclusive rights to a client list, meaning that, if the homeowner refused to contract with them, no other garbage collector would be allowed to do so. This system of ownership had no legal status, but it was enforced by the other garbage collectors in conjunction with their Balmiki family and friends. Their rights to their client lists could be bequeathed, sold or rented out to others. The garbage collectors thus owned a source of vital sustenance; it is this arrangement of social practices that I have been calling "proprietary livelihood."

I also described how the formal workers of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi were similarly involved in a system in which they owned their livelihoods, although, in contrast to their informal counterparts, they had almost no control over it. *Safai karamchari* positions

within the MCD were purchased with bribes equivalent to about 10 months worth of the position's salary and, once owned, were virtually impossible to lose. Purchasing the jobs was attractive to members of the Balmiki community because they paid substantially better wages than the other unskilled labor jobs that would be available to them and because they were a steady source of on-the-books income. Their relatively high wage also meant that the positions could be rented out: the officially employed *safai karamchari* could subcontract the work to others at market-rate wages and pocket the difference. While the municipal *safai karamcharis* could not transfer their jobs as easily as the door-to-door sanitation workers could, the connections that they developed with their union representatives and their managers in the MCD, all of whom were involved in the economy of bribery, made it easier for them to obtain positions for their kids (when there wasn't a hiring freeze in place). Unlike their informal counterparts, the MCD workers had to pay out a steady stream of smaller bribes to their superiors and face daily indignities from the same. While the MCD workers' ownership of their livelihoods was not quite as complete as that of the informal garbage collectors, they still effectively owned their jobs.

For both sets of workers, the caste component of their work arrangements was strong. Not only was it the case that the vast majority of them belonged to the Balmiki community, but it was also the case that their caste mates, the *biraderi,* were a necessary part of ensuring their ownership over their livelihoods. When disputes occurred between the door-to-door garbage collectors over who had rights to a particular address, a more educated and more senior member of the community was brought in to mediate the dispute. Because the disputants were members of the same caste, and therefore shared many social ties, pressure from friends and family was usually enough to keep the peace. In the rare instances in which violence became necessary,

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matters were still settled within the community because their proprietary rights had no legal status in the first place. Moreover, the garbage collectors' ability to sell their client lists could only happen within caste networks because, once again, the legitimacy of the asset only existed within the caste community. When lists came up for sale, which was not often, it was a micro-political issue and, usually, the asset was sold to a relative. The value of their proprietary livelihoods was determined by these micro-politics and not the open market. The entire system was a challenge to market processes.

The owned livelihoods of the MCD *safai karamcharis* were also heavily embedded in caste relationships. Not only were the vast majority of the workers members of the Balmiki community, the unions that represented them and helped them manage the system were also staffed by Balmikis. The unions played a major role in Balmiki political and community life – supporting Balmiki politicians, patronizing temples, organizing processions, etc. Because the whole system of bribery was blatantly illegal, trust and power were both major factors in its success, and the unions, being overwhelming Balmiki, could mobilize social pressures to keep people in line. The unions could also use their relationships with Balmiki politicians to keep the reforming forces at bay and to make sure that the MCD sanitation workforce, widely believed to be bloated, was not cut. They also performed the important job of checking the managers' mistreatment of the rank and file sanitation workers. As I discussed in Chapter 4, the unions had connections to organized crime figures in the Balmiki caste. This fact meant that threats of violence hovered in the background of all their activities. Although MCD jobs could be purchased (before the hiring freeze), they did not simply go to the highest bidder because, again, issues of trust and loyalty were involved, and existing workers and union members were

frequently trying to get their own family members installed into a position. Keeping the process within the cast community helped manage this micro-political process – a process that precluded the market valuation of either the sanitation workers' labor or the "price" of their jobs.

These sets of practices gave both the informal and formal sector workers ownership over a kind of wealth – a job. But, their ownership rights were only as good as the community that could enforce them and, importantly, only as good their relationships to the people in said community. A falling out with the wrong person, a disgraceful misdeed, a disgraceful misdeed by one's child and many other things could endanger one's ability to gain and maintain one's proprietary livelihood. In depending upon their communities to enforce the ownership rights of their wealth, the sanitation workers were no different from anyone else with ownership rights. The only difference was that their system openly personal and social whereas capitalist/modern systems demand that this process be depersonalized. When disputes happen, the parties expect people they *do not know* to decide the case, and they expect them to do so according to codified laws that were not written specifically for them. If a dispute involves the price of something, they rely on the impersonal forces of the market to determine its fair value. Under capitalist/modern conditions, wealth is no less social than under any other set of conditions, but the social interactions are structured in such a way that people do not experience this sociality; they do not experience the ownership of their wealth as interactions with other people. Instead, they simply experience themselves as owning *things*. Indeed, modern society fails to be modern when people *do* experience the sociality of their wealth. The wealth entailed in proprietary livelihood, by contrast, cannot but be experienced personally and socially, and, for this reason, I refer to it as transparently social wealth.

This particular form of transparently social wealth, proprietary livelihood, posits and presupposes a world in which a field of specialized tasks, a set of jobs, can be treated as the exclusive domain of a group. For most of the twentieth century, the Balmiki caste did not have much trouble treating municipal sanitation jobs as their personal domain because few other castes, not even other Dalit castes, wanted to associate themselves with sanitation work. More recently, people from higher castes, even Brahmins, have been trying to buy the jobs (not to perform the work themselves but to subcontract them out, usually to Balmikis). The Balmiki *safai karamcharis* are bitterly opposed to this because they view sanitation jobs as their exclusive domain.

This tendency to see a particular line of work as a group's exclusive domain is tied to the ideology and practice of proprietary livelihood. Under modern/capitalist logic, a job is simply a temporary money-making opportunity in an ever changing market of such opportunities. The practices of proprietary livelihood posit and presuppose a world in which the specialized roles in society (what we would otherwise call "jobs") are long-lasting resources that are distributed according to a zero-sum game of such resources. As capturing land gives the captors the potential to either sustain themselves or offer sustenance to others, so too does capturing "jobs." Under this framework, owning a job is not fundamentally different from owning land and thus not fundamentally different from owning the means of production. But the practices of proprietary livelihood posit and presuppose a fundamentally non-bourgeois, non-capitalist and non-modern conception of property: property is not a material thing in one's possession but a position in a set of social relationships that gives the owner certain benefits but also certain obligations. Under this framework, the ownership of a life-sustaining physical resource like land

is not fundamentally different from the ownership of a life-sustaining *immaterial* thing like a "job." Both bestow upon the owner a *location* in society, a location that entitles them to certain desirable things but also obligates them to do less desirable things, namely, work.

The framework of proprietary livelihood, the one in which society's tasks are seen as ownable resources on the order of land, is not unique to sanitation workers of twenty-first century Delhi. In Chapter 1, I reviewed the literature on urban sanitation workers (sweepers and scavengers) to show that the practices I found in Delhi have clear precedents. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the anthropological literature on Indian villages to show that proprietary livelihood practices were the norm up through the mid-twentieth century. In Chapter 3, I delved deeper into the historical and anthropological evidence to show that the practices of proprietary livelihood were a key feature of economic life in western and northern India from at least the seventeenth century until the mid-twentieth century.[1] I show that any potential source of sustenance, whether it was land, the opportunity to provide a service, the chance to collect taxes, or virtually any social role that might generate wealth, was seen as an ownable resource (like land) and thus as something that could be captured and controlled. My theory of proprietary livelihood thus suggests that the history of caste is one in which groups, endogamous groups, capture and hold "territories" of livelihood. Some groups, the "high castes," were able to capture the more lucrative and prestigious livelihoods while others, like the Balmikis, were condemned to literally shovel the shit.

To fully understand proprietary livelihood, we must see it as a form of double bondage. I invoke this language of "double bondage" to present the converse image of Marx's doubly free

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[1] It seems likely to me that the practice of treating fields of work as he exclusive domains of some groups has a much longer history and broader history in India and the world but I have not yet had a chance to do the research necessary to justify this claim.

labor. If capitalist wage labor made people free in "the double sense" (Marx 1976, 272) that they were both *free to* sell their labor to whomever they wanted and *free of* the means of production, then proprietary livelihood made (and makes) people bonded in the double sense that they are bound both to a regular source of income and also to all the stigma, stagnation and suffering that might come with that source of income.

There was nothing romantic about this double bondage, but it did (and still does) give the owner of proprietary livelihood a social location in a community, a place to belong and dwell. As terrible as life was for Dalits in India's old villages, it at least made them an acknowledged part of the village. In the old villages, it was the norm to occupy the social location that came with a proprietary livelihood and it was highly exceptional to be a stranger (*uphari)* or a pariah (the few disconnected people who lived in the interstitial spaces between the villages). Under capitalist conditions, in which people have been expropriated from the means of production, everyone is an outcast and a stranger. In places like India, where unemployment and underemployment are rampant, the condition of expropriated freedom can be deadly on top of being lonely. As "free" wage labor becomes the norm, proprietary livelihood becomes exceptional and illegitimate, but it also becomes a highly attractive method of insulating oneself from the ravages expropriated freedom. The reason proprietary livelihood persists, I argue, is that it has been reconfigured to serve this end.

In Chapter 4 of this dissertation I examined another instance of transparently social wealth existing among the Balmikis, one that was tied to proprietary livelihood but not directly so. In that chapter, I told the story of an organized crime leader of the Balmiki community who was intimately connected with the major *safai karamchari* union of the time. Mor Singh had a

reputation for murderous violence (and court documents validated this) but he was also a generous benefactor of Balmiki temples, Balmiki social service organizations and major Balmiki celebrations. He had close but precarious relationships with major Balmiki politicians. All of this, combined with bombastic charisma, gave him a loyal following within the Balmiki community. I show that Mor Singh clearly controlled significant wealth in so far as he held expensive buildings in Old Delhi and regularly doled out resources to clients, but I also show that he had few legal titles to any of this wealth. I argued that, because it lacked state recognition, his wealth was in fact inextricable from the complex social processes that existed between him, his allies and his followers. His wealth, I argue, was transparently socially wealth, a fact that became dramatically clear when social miscalculations landed him in jail.

In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I looked at middle class attempts to gain control over sanitation in their neighborhoods. I showed how they were attempting to destroy the proprietary livelihood systems at work in their neighborhoods by implementing a system of wage labor. They were hoping that the power to hire and fire the garbage collectors and other sanitation workers would yield the sorts of "neat and clean" neighborhoods they desired. I argue that the difficulties that they faced in doing this stemmed from the fact that they were fighting the appeal of transparently social wealth.

In the last chapter of this dissertation, I return to the question of anti-competitive practices and attempt to head off some of my critics at the metaphorical pass. Economists and many political scientists would simply dismiss the practices that I have called proprietary livelihood and transparently social wealth by labeling them as "rent extractive" and "rent seeking" behaviors. In this chapter, I go over theories of rent – classical and neoclassical – to

argue that the concept of rent has always served as a way of naming and containing forms of sociality that would otherwise challenge their worldview, one based on rational actors. By labeling some forms of wealth as "rent," economists and political scientists are able to reduce the social nature of wealth to a single, isolated revenue – rent – and thereby maintain the illusion that the world is populated by *homo economicus.*

When I began this project, I did not expect it to force me to confront such major questions about caste, capitalism and modern society. Now that it has, I hope that this dissertation will provide some useful concepts and categories for anthropologists and historians working in a variety of temporal and spatial contexts. In Chapter 3, I already provided some morsels of evidence that suggest that proprietary livelihood was the norm in medieval and early modern Europe and I suspect that similar evidence from many more places and many more time periods could be found. In this dissertation I have also, rather unwittingly, proffered a two-sided theoretical framework in which, on one side, expropriated freedom exists as the default condition for most of the world's population, and, on the other side, people resist this condition through practices of transparently social wealth. I hope others will find some utility in these theories and concepts as well as in the ethnographic evidence that I have provided in this work.

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