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# Agrarian questions of labor in urban India: middle migrants, translocal householding and the intersectional politics of social reproduction

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## ABSTRACT

Our paper re-considers the agrarian question in urban India by focusing on the social reproduction of labor in informal economy households. Based on life histories of working-class women of rural origin, we explore lived forms of differentiation within the informal economy, the social division of labor as mediated by intersecting lines of difference, and possibilities of disorienting normative hierarchies through acts of ‘cultural production’. Our term ‘middle migrants’ characterizes households that have managed to establish a foothold in cities, even as they remain enmeshed in their rural lives through translocal householding and cultural dispositions to difference.

## KEYWORDS

Agrarian question; social reproduction; labor; informal economy; urban; gender; capital; middle migrants

## Introduction

Vidisha (age 26) and Ujjwala (age 22), sisters, work in the garment export sector on the edges of Delhi, in the Special Export Processing Zone that is known in the local parlance simply as ‘Boundary’.<sup>1</sup> The garment industry’s fortunes have waxed and waned in recent years, in response to shifting global fashions and consumer demand, as well as price competition from rival firms in Bangladesh and Vietnam. But the two sisters, who come from a Jatav family with no land holdings, in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, have managed to stay employed.<sup>2</sup> Unlike other parts of Asia where it is commonplace for young women to migrate to cities for work, regional structures of patriarchy and cultural reproduction in north India strongly discourage migration by unmarried girls. It took Vidisha and Ujjwala several weeks to convince their parents, who finally relented when the sisters pressed home the argument that their earnings in Delhi would pay for ‘their growing family’s growing needs’; that is, for family social reproduction.<sup>3</sup> The parents

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<sup>1</sup>Names of respondents have been altered for confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup>The Jatav caste is Dalit (a community that was formerly considered ‘untouchable’).

<sup>3</sup>In India, female rural to urban migration is predominantly for marriage, to someone already resident in the city, or after marriage, when one moves with one’s husband, or follows him. The National Sample Survey, which classifies females as ‘economic migrants’, ‘marriage migrants’ and ‘followers’, documents large increases in female marriage migration to

agreed to send them 'for a few days.' That was eight years ago. Vidisha and Ujjwala's became a translocal household, a relatively successful one, as we will see, and one that, unusually in North India, depended primarily on the earnings of two unmarried, single daughters.

While debate over the nature of ongoing capitalist transformations of agriculture in India remains vigorous (Lerche, Shah, and Harriss-White 2013; Byres 2016; Carlson 2018), on at least two fronts there is consensus: first, patterns of agrarian change are sharply uneven across regions and second, the modal condition of existence for a rural majority is increasingly one of semi-proletarianization (Lerche 2011; Ramamurthy 2011; Levien 2018) – with such households neither able to survive exclusively on land-based activities such as agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, and so on; nor (willing or able to be) fully dependent on wage work. In fact, agrarian studies scholars have persuasively documented that combinations of farm work and non-farm wage labor, disguised wage labor, indentured work, self-employment, and various forms of petty commodity production<sup>4</sup>, are now all routine elements in the livelihood repertoires of impoverished rural households (Bernstein 2010; Lerche 2010; Harriss-White 2012; 2014). Illustratively, Levien (2018, 93) notes from his study of Rajpura, a village in the state of Rajasthan, that, 'Owning a cow, buffalo, or small herd of goats moderated the penury of the lower-caste semiproletariat, providing their families with milk and, in some cases, a small supplemental income' – a description that would have captured the economic circumstances of Vidisha and Ujjwala's household before the two sisters became the family's primary wage earners in Delhi's garment industry.<sup>5</sup>

### The agrarian question of labor, differentiation and difference

The story of Vidisha and Ujjwala's household serves as our portal into the 'agrarian question', one of the formative concerns of agrarian marxism. Although it increasingly takes plural forms, the 'classic' agrarian question has always been a matter of economy and politics: how effectively capital penetrates, seizes, and transforms agriculture and agrarian social relations, and whether rural wage laborers and the poor peasantry can be enrolled in a political alliance with urban workers (Engels 1894; Kautsky 1988 [1899]; Lenin 1964 [1899]; Banaji 1976; Byres 1977; Akram-Lodhi and Kay 2010a, 2010b). A related aspect concerns the contribution of agriculture to industrialization: how agriculture can be mobilized for industrialization as a source of surplus capital, cheap labor, low-cost wage goods for urban workers, and a home market for industry's products (Patnaik 1986; Byres 2003; Lerche, Shah, and Harriss-White 2013). In an influential formulation, Bernstein (2004,

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urban India in recent decades with 90 million additional women migrating for reasons of marriage between 1983 and 2008 (Rao 2017). According to another recent study, female migration exceeded male migration to all major Indian cities, including Delhi and Hyderabad, in 2005–06 (Bhagat 2017). Many scholars of gender and migration in India, including Mazumdar, Neetha, and Agnihotri (2013), argue that the increase in female marriage migration accompanied by a decrease in female labor force participation rates signals a deepening of patriarchy. But, as feminist analyses have also demonstrated, marriage as an institution, a discourse, and as a class and caste strategy has changed considerably (Kaur and Palriwala 2014).

<sup>4</sup>Harriss-White (2014, 984) defines petty commodity production 'as the combination of ownership of the means of production, of self/family exploitation and of exploitation through several markets other than that for labour.'

<sup>5</sup>Their father, a mason (*raj mistri*), drinks and is an unreliable earner; their older brother polishes marble and is employed only intermittently; the younger siblings, four sisters and a brother, are in school; the sale of milk from livestock provides a nominal income.

2010) has argued that the 'classic' agrarian question of capital in which the agrarian question of labor was once subsumed no longer has the world-historical import it once did and, indeed, is no longer in need of resolution in the global South because of the 'globalization' of food systems and capital flows. But the agrarian question of labor (now uncoupled from the agrarian question of capital) remains alive, in fact more pressing than ever. According to Bernstein:

The reverse side of the thesis that 'globalization' represents a new phase of the centralization and concentration, as well as mobility (and 'financialization'), of capital, is that it also generates an intensification of the *fragmentation of labour*. That is, the growing global army (or reserve army) of labour pursues its reproduction in conditions of increasingly insecure and oppressive wage employment combined with a range of likewise insecure 'informal sector' ('survival') activity, typically subject to its own forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity. And, of course, many of its number pursue their means of reproduction across different sites of the social division of labour: urban and rural, agricultural and non-agricultural, wage employment and self-employment ... (2004, 204–205; italics in the original)

This is certainly true of India. Although statistical data on short-term and longer-term migration in India remains inadequate (Bird and Deshingkar 2009; Government of India 2017), a large number of empirical studies suggest that flows of rural-to-rural and rural-to-urban migrants are significant (Bremar 1994; Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Rogaly and Coppard 2003; Deshingkar and Farrington 2009). Based on several recent studies of migration, the government's flagship *Economic Survey of India, 2016–17*, concludes that the Census of India data has limitations in capturing circular migration, female migration, and commuter migration (Gol 2017, 267; Tumbe 2018). By implication, a growing number of rural households in India, as their counterparts in Asia, are now multi- or translocal in character, reliant on spatially-stretched relations of social reproduction (Gardner 1993; Aguilar 2009; Deshingkar and Akter 2009; Rogaly and Thieme 2012; Nguyen and Locke 2014; Jacka 2017). But there has been insufficient attention to the phenomenon of translocal householding and how its patterns shape migration, social reproduction, and informal economies in India.<sup>6</sup>

Our paper engages with Bernstein's (2004) foregoing summons by deepening the analysis of two aspects: differentiation within the informal economy and the social division of labor across 'intersecting lines' of difference and sites of employment. Based on a rich set of oral histories of rural migrants in two cities in India, we argue, first, that some households in the urban informal economy are best characterized as *middle migrants*. Although there is no single template by which households achieve this status, as middle migrants they exhibit three characteristics: they are members of the working class who have managed to establish a 'foothold in the city' (*'shahar me tikna'*); they are normally able to meet the demands of social reproduction, and, in some instances, generate modest surpluses; and finally, they remain oriented to the agrarian through translocal householding and cultural dispositions to social difference. Second, we argue that the strategies for the social reproduction of labor in such middle migrant households are dynamic and translocal. An intersectional approach to social reproduction enables us to capture patterns and changes over time and which specific social relations of difference – caste, gender, and

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<sup>6</sup>De Haan (2006) makes a similar case.

generation in the oral histories we discuss – household members are oriented towards; how lines of difference are co-produced; and where the moments of ‘cultural production’ lie.

We discuss our methodology and field work before putting our arguments in conversation with the literature on translocality and urban migration and the Marxist feminist debates on social reproduction, including recent scholarship on translocal households and family reproduction in Asia. The stakes of our turn to cultural production and its contradictions as political practice are clarified. We then share four life histories. An intersectional analysis of social reproduction in these households maps their ‘middleness’ and their translocal organization. We discuss their stays in the city, their continuing but morphing agrarian orientations to specific social relations of difference, as well as moments of disruption in caste, gender and generational norms. We conclude by explaining the twofold import of an intersectional analysis of translocal householding: first, to the evolving scholarship on agrarian studies and social reproduction; and second, to suggest that acknowledging the minor politics of transformation in ordinary lives can provide modest yet vital openings for agrarian marxist thinking.

## Fieldwork and methodology

Our paper is based on a selection of cases drawn from a much larger pool of oral histories of rural-to-urban migrants in Delhi (north India) and Hyderabad (south India), aimed at understanding their experiences of living and working in urban informal economies. With the aid of our institutional collaborators in the two cities (Centre for Policy Research and Hyderabad Urban Lab, in Delhi and Hyderabad respectively) we took roughly NW to SE transects through each city with the aim of identifying five working class settlements that house migrants. These transects covered the cities’ core (older) areas as well its peripheral (newer) areas. Our expectation was that we would find earlier generations of migrants to the cities in older settlements, and the more recent migrants in the newer settlements. We also expected to capture occupational variability and trajectories in migrants’ livelihoods by canvassing older as well as newer settlements. Additionally, we undertook key informant interviews with people who had either a particularly acute understanding of a settlement’s dynamics, or of broader processes that have shaped two cities in very different ways. In virtually all instances we entered a settlement through one or more acquaintances, but once there we followed a snowball sampling strategy for our interviews. In all, aided by two excellent RAs in each city, we were able to conduct a total of 135 oral history interviews between September 2015 and August 2016, 77 male and 58 female (Table 1).

Having explained the purpose of our research, we began each interview by gathering basic contextual information: age, place of birth, family and marital status, date of first arrival in the city, social and economic conditions in their places of rural origin including caste, land ownership, forms of laboring, and reasons for leaving. We then spent considerable time detailing the migration and livelihood histories of each respondent, including circumstances of arrival in the city, how they established a foothold in it, and their trajectory within the city, including places of work and habitation within a given city and in other cities (if any). Subsequently, we explored our respondents’ material and cultural connections to their rural homes, and how the nature of their engagement with places of

**Table 1.** Interview sampling frame.

<i>Oral Histories</i>	Delhi	Hyderabad	Total
Male	27	50	77
Female	27	31	58
Total	54	81	135
< 25 years of age	13	14	27
> 25 years of age	41	67	108
<i>Key Informants</i>			
Male	5	13	18
Female	1	5	6

origin had changed over time. This was followed by a long discussion of respondents' engagements with the city, focusing on work, leisure, and avenues of desire. We also asked respondents how work and habitation had influenced their self-presentation, if at all. We next inquired about social reproduction and care work, and how migration to the city had impacted these domains. Finally, we turned to questions concerning their plans for the future. We concluded by thanking each respondent, asking if we could return with follow up questions if the need arose.

Predictably, the depth and richness of oral histories varied considerably (cf. Rogaly and Qureshi 2017). While follow-up meetings with a subset of interviewees are ongoing, including accompanying them to their rural homes, for this paper we have relied on a subset of completed oral histories that illuminate the varied dynamics of social reproduction and cultural production among urban migrants who work in the informal sector in Delhi and Hyderabad. Plainly, it is difficult to generalize about broader societal trends from oral histories and our paper does not claim to do so. At the same time, we are resolute in our view that a textured oral history can reveal the qualitative dimensions of migrants' practices, experiences, and imbrication within wider structural processes in ways that a survey instrument cannot.

### Urban migration, translocal households, and intersectionality

The literature on migrants who have found ways to remain in the city and orchestrate varying levels of economic stability, a population Anh et al. (2012, 1127) term 'stayers' in the Vietnamese context, has been discussed in terms of their relation to capital. There is no consensus on whether they are urban petty capitalists or an urban proletariat with rural characteristics. Chari (2004), for example, meticulously traces how members of the dominant Gounder caste were able to transfer agrarian surpluses and, with the aid of fraternal networks and 'toil', become knitwear capitalists in the provincial town of Tiruppur, Tamil Nadu. Jacobs (2017) provides a different case, of a group of 185 Zabaleza households who have occupied land in the city of Cape Town, South Africa, to raise livestock and engage in crop cultivation on small plots: an unusual instance of urban 're-peasantization'. Whereas Chari offers an ethnographically informed spatial history of 'urban petty capitalists with peasant characteristics' (our phrasing), Jacobs evokes 'an urban proletariat with peasant characteristics' (his phrasing). Suffice to say that reliable data on 'stayers' is hard to come by, whether in India, Vietnam, or South Africa.

Furthermore, the modalities by which rural-to-urban migrants are able to stake a place in cities (rather than give up and return home or persist as seasonal or commuter migrants) are varied. Indeed, many 'stayers' we encountered in our research are more aptly

characterized as long duration circular migrants rather than as permanent city dwellers. Most importantly, for our purposes here, like their counterparts in Hanoi, the migrants we met in the cities of Delhi and Hyderabad have not made ‘clear transitions from rural to urban, whether in terms of outlook, livelihoods or behaviour’ (Anh et al. 2012, 1127). Unlike the Zabaleza farmers ‘who combine proletarian and peasant forms of livelihood in the city and who have no intention or desire to return to the countryside’ (Jacobs 2017, 4), a large number of our respondents – in spite of their extended stays in cities – either imagine returning to their rural places of origin eventually or actively cultivate cultural and economic ties with their rural homes. We were struck in the course of our research that even where migrants’ economic ties have grown weak, their agrarian existence remains the point – the ‘orientation’ – from which our respondents’ worlds invariably unfold.<sup>7</sup> Our paper shows that integrating political economy and intersectionality cannot follow an additive or multiplicative model (where multiple axes of oppression are mathematically combined using concepts like ‘triple jeopardy’ to explain the predicament of working-class women who experience class, gender, and caste oppression). Rather, the challenge is to understand the mutual constitution of structures of domination and the lived contradictions these generate.<sup>8</sup> Thus, in a recent essay Priya Deshingkar (2017, 119) calls for more ‘contextualized, disaggregated and intersectional understandings of migration in India’ to understand ‘new configurations of mobility, particularly those of poorer social groups [which] are inadequately addressed in migration theory and policy in India.’ Furthermore, although the agrarian studies scholarship on India powerfully reveals the forms of oppression and exploitation that the rural poor and urban migrants among them face on a daily basis (Breman 1994, 2013; Harriss-White and Gooptu 2001), it has paid less attention to the minor but significant ways in which members of subordinate groups are able to displace dominant social reproductive scripts of gender, patriarchy and caste.

### Itineraries of social reproduction

The political economy scholarship on India, agrarian and otherwise, has focused predominantly on labor’s relation to capital and less so on labor’s relation to producing labor within households, across generations, and to sustain communities. Similarly, it has paid relatively little attention to changes in household formation over time. Razavi (2009, 200) in a comprehensive review of the scholarship on gender and agrarian change writes that, ‘unpaid (non-commodified) provisioning of household members has been invisible to political economists of agrarian change and continues to be invisible in research on livelihoods.’ While such questions of social reproduction have been insightfully taken up by sociologists, anthropologists, and historians of India (Vatuk 1972; Sharma 1985; Palriwala

<sup>7</sup>We borrow the concept of ‘orientation’ from phenomenology to emphasize the lived experience of inhabiting a body and how consciousness is always directed ‘toward’ an object (Ahmed 2006, 2).

<sup>8</sup>Intersectionality has a long history in feminist scholarship. It is widely acknowledged and institutionalized in US universities as a theoretical contribution of black feminist activists and scholars. A recent resurgence highlights intersectionality’s salience, methods, and shortcomings. For a comprehensive review of this literature and thoughtful meditation on intersectionality as a theorization of difference see Nash (2017). Mitchell (2013) and Bohrer (2018) examine the fissures and potential affinities between intersectionality and Marxism. In India, feminist debates on the origins and usefulness of ‘intersectionality’ as an analytic are ongoing (Menon 2015; John 2015). We employ the term cautiously to think about the co-constitution of differences and prospective political openings within the current capitalist moment.



1991; Clark 1993; Uberoi 1993; Raheja and Gold 1994; Kapadia 1995; Jeffery and Jeffery 1996; De Haan 2006; Grover 2009; Chowdhry 2011) and, less frequently, economists (Agarwal 1994; Harriss-White 2001), engagements with agrarian political economy and urban migration dynamics have been generally sparse. The dearth of cross-pollination between agrarian political economy and gender studies scholarship is odd because social reproduction *has* been the cornerstone of Marxist feminist theory and politics from Rosa Luxemburg to its current resurgence in various fields. So, it is worth posing the question once more: What is 'social reproduction' and why is it significant?

Tamara Jacka, in a recent article in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, provides a point of departure, defining social reproduction as inclusive of 'biological reproduction through childbirth and child rearing; the reproduction of humans, through socialization and education as well as the provision of food, shelter and other goods; the maintenance of human wellbeing through the provision of welfare, health care and other services, and through social and cultural activities; and the reproduction of social relations and social institutions' (Jacka 2017, 2). Linking social reproduction and capitalism, Cindi Katz (2001, 709) conceptualizes the former as the repertoire of 'social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis and through which social relations and the material basis of capitalism are renewed' Katz (2001, 709). Finally, Nancy Fraser (2016, 23) draws our attention to subject formation in her elaboration of the concept: 'Variously called care, affective labor, or subjectivation, this activity forms capitalism's human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings while also constituting them as social beings, forming their habitus and the cultural ethos in which they move.'

Marxist feminist understandings of the relationship of social reproduction to capitalism have shifted over time: from the so-called 'dual system' approach in the 1970s and 80s, which theorized patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems that articulated to create the contemporary system of class and gender exploitation (Walby 1988), to the 'single system' approach that conceptualized patriarchy and capitalism as mutually constituting (Young 1981; Vogel 1983; Federici 2004), rendering women's unpaid work as functional to capitalism, to an acknowledgement, in the 1990s, that social difference – race and caste, for example – intersected with gender to position specific groups of women in the most undervalued, underpaid *and* stigmatized jobs (Jain and Banerjee 1985; Crenshaw 1995; Collins 2000; Gimenez 2001; Aguilar 2012). Responding to the globalization of capital, scholars also tried to understand its consequent restructuring of social reproduction. In a formative statement that conceptualized social reproduction as 'life's work', Cindi Katz wrote: 'Social reproduction is the fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life. It is also a set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension. Social reproduction encompasses daily and long term reproduction' (2001, 711). Subsequently, just as 'globalization' prompted Bernstein (2004) to reformulate the classic agrarian question of capital, it led feminist scholarship on social reproduction to uncover new phenomena such as global care chains and transnational surrogacy as symptomatic of spatiotemporal transformations in capitalism. Most recently, an efflorescence of feminist scholarship has returned to social reproduction in the context of neoliberalism, precarity, and financialization.

The thrust of this scholarship is on the crises of 'care': the transference of the burdens of reproduction to individuals, families, and communities as state provisioning for social



reproduction is eviscerated. Nancy Fraser (2016, 22), an influential contributor to recent discussions, writes that on the one hand, 'social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies.' After expounding on this general proposition about 'capitalism *as such*', Fraser details three phases of capitalist development to demonstrate that the social reproductive crisis is a recurrent contradiction of capitalism. Instructive as Fraser's analysis is, it is firmly located in the historical experience of advanced capitalism in Euro-America. Other recent contributors to the renewed discussion on social reproduction (Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Meehan and Strauss 2015; Bhattacharya 2017, among others) offer necessary correctives from the global South. Even so, with the exception of a small body of recent research on China and Vietnam, to which we turn next, there has been little attention to questions of social reproduction in the context of intensifying mobility and changing entanglements between urban and rural societies.

Feminist scholarship on social reproduction in East and Southeast Asia, much of it published in the pages of this journal, seeks to rectify the 'strikingly little attention to social reproduction in the literature on rural political economies and agrarian change in China, or indeed elsewhere in Asia' (Jacka 2017, 2). Its major contribution is the phenomenon of translocal householding (also called translocal family reproduction or split labor reproduction): the ways multiple generations in geographically dispersed locations provide livelihoods and care. Nguyen and Locke (2014), for example, argue that the spatial reorganization of householding, straddling the urban and rural, is a response to the new forms of market socialism in China and Vietnam. The state is at the center of these processes, regulating household migration through the urban registration system in order to offload the costs of producing labor-power to rural areas. By contrast, Jacka (2017) provocatively contends that aspirational housing and education are the primary drivers of agrarian change in China. Family reproductive needs can no longer be met by income from smallholder agriculture, so villages are emptying out of working adults, resulting in land commodification and mechanization over large consolidated plots. Consequently, she proposes that in regions with high rates of mobility, analysis of agrarian change requires an analytical framework that is attentive to four interlocking issues:

[C]hanges in the organisation of *reproductive work*, especially rural family members' unpaid care work; an increase in the *translocality* of rural strategies for family reproduction, involving linkages between productive and reproductive work performed by family members in a variety of geographically dispersed locations; shifts in *rural family relations*, and expectations and behaviour relating to gender and inter-generational difference; and changes in rural *family aspirations for reproduction* and social mobility. (2017, 15)

These observations raise important questions about patriarchy and capitalism. Whereas for Nguyen and Locke (2014) translocal households continue to be patriarchal institutions that deliver a reserve army of labor for Chinese and Vietnamese urban capitalist development, other scholars are more circumspect about whether translocal householding renews female oppression or may lead to empowerment: they point to the variety of forms translocal householding takes and to transformations in household organization with changing aspirations (Ye et al. 2016). Thus, Yan (2016, 245) mobilizes the concept of 'descendent familialism' wherein three generations of patrilocal, patrilineal families adapt 'to a new

and flexible form of family structure, family resources of all sorts flow downward, and, most important, the focus of the existential meanings of life has shifted from the ancestors to the grandchildren.'

In spite of high rates of rural to urban mobility, discourses of ruralness – 'lacking *suzhi*' in China and 'having a low *dân trí*' in Vietnam – devalue rural migrants to the city, culturally constructing them as perpetual hicks in the city, who must strive harder to achieve the higher quality, professional skills, education, knowledge of the law, and appropriate cultural practices of urban-ness (Yan 2008; Nguyen and Locke 2014). Yet, a significant number, in Vietnam, are successful in 'becoming urban': they successfully shed their identity as temporary sojourners in the city, achieving a modicum of economic success (Harms 2011; Anh et al. 2012).<sup>9</sup>

These 'stayers', who we elect to call 'middle migrants' in this paper, have discovered ways to remain in the city through a combination of toil, chance, street smarts, and ingenuity. They are not the poorest of the poor, or even the most stigmatized. Their working lives in the nooks and crannies of India's vast informal economies continue to be marked by hardship and uncertainty, but not utter abjection. To reiterate, middle migrants exhibit three characteristics: they are members of the working-class who have managed to secure a foothold in the city; they are typically able to meet the demands of simple reproduction and, intermittently, accumulate modest surpluses; finally, in spite of the foregoing, they inhabit a 'middle' where the agrarian steadfastly remains their 'zero point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is "there" over "there" ... [and it] is from this point that the differences between "this side" and "that side" matter' (Ahmed 2006, 8). Middle migrants constitute an 'awkward class', most often semi-proletarian with access to some means of production (whether urban or rural), but typically over their working lives traversing farm work, wage labor, contract labor, piece-rate work, and petty entrepreneurship. Geography matters in these life trajectories.

Our life histories of middle migrants underscore the importance of different formations of regional patriarchy in the hinterlands of Delhi and Hyderabad, and how these variably shape gendered orientations to agrarian, post-marital kin support structures, as well as participation in informal urban economies under globalized capitalism. The northern states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and Rajasthan that form the primary catchment areas for migration to Delhi are deeply patriarchal. North Indian patriarchy is (infamously) characterized by patrilineal, patrilocal, village exogamous, caste hypergamous marriage, restrictions on female mobility, the association of higher group status with female modesty (symbolized by covering heads with a *sari*, *ghunghat*, or *burka*), and prohibitions on women's 'outside' activities, including labor (Karve 1993[1953]; Dyson and Moore 1983; Chowdhry 2007). Migrants to cities from northern regions are typically male, and often leave their families behind in the village. When accompanied by families, wives are not permitted to work or to do so, but only reluctantly: the higher the caste the stronger the proscriptions against female mobility and participation in the public domain.<sup>10</sup> In conversations, male migrants who have left their families behind commonly describe Delhi or Hyderabad as '*pardesh*' [another country] or '*bidesh*' [a foreign country] – even those who have lived and worked in the city for two decades or more. Correspondingly, their villages

<sup>9</sup>On similar successful processes of straddling the rural and urban and thriving in South Africa, see du Toit and Neves (2014).

<sup>10</sup>These patterns hold when North Indians migrate to Hyderabad, as our oral histories with them revealed.

are referred to as *desh*. Many of our male respondents return once or twice a year to visit their families and, when there are elections, to cast their vote. It was commonplace among older male migrants to have accepted that their families would remain in the village, and that they would go back eventually, once their bodies were 'spent'. By contrast, younger males were apt to pine for their wives and families (demonstrably emotional when sharing their cell phone pictures with us) and continuously weigh the relative costs of reproduction in the city – especially for good, *pucca* housing and private schooling and college – as compared to the village.

By contrast, regional patriarchy exhibits a more attenuated form in the catchments of Telangana – Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Jharkhand – that send migrants to Hyderabad. In South Indian regional patriarchy, marriage is patrilineal and patrilocal but both caste and village endogamous, with a preference for consanguineous partners. Prohibitions on female mobility and 'outside' work are less onerous than in the North, although 'sanskritization' (in M.N. Srinivas' famous articulation) causes castes aspiring to rise in social status to signal this by sanctions against women's mobility, 'indecent' dress, and work outside the home. While wary of generalizing, our fieldwork in Hyderabad's working-class settlements suggests a high incidence of male migrants who live with their families. Among non-Muslim migrants (and even some Muslim migrants), it is common to find wives and daughters who work outside the home. When juxtaposed with the difference in political society, this makes the prospect of permanently settling in Hyderabad more amenable. Many have transferred their voter registration to Hyderabad and hope to build a house in the city, for this is where their children will live.

Social reproduction is the impetus for rural to urban migration in many of the oral histories people shared with us. For women, the move is inevitably tied to their status before and after marriage. The determinateness of women's agrarian social locations and norms, especially caste, intersect with regional patriarchies to shape the geographies of social reproduction. But, as we will show, women also confound the determinations of social location to produce space.

## Cultural production and its contradictions

If social reproduction is 'life's work' that comprises 'social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis' (Katz 2001, 709), its ultimate effects are to renew the social relations and the material basis of (racial, patriarchal) capitalism. But as Paul Willis has argued, this theory runs the risk of leaving under-specified not only the ways in which social reproduction is finally achieved (the sites, institutions, organs, and processes that secure its spatio-temporal persistence), but also the 'lived cultural production of the working class' (1981, 59) that contains germs of change, however humble. To be clear, Willis realizes that 'cultural production' is not free of contradictions and, indeed, may end up renewing the very ideological apparatuses that it, at some point, challenges. This is because the 'creative practices' of cultural production are frequently marked by 'in between-ness': in between intended and unintended, deliberate and tacit, witting and unwitting, dissenting and desiring of the familiar (cf. Gidwani and Sivaramakrishnan 2003; Ramamurthy 2011). Margaret Archer reminds us that being human is to *not* be a figure into whom 'is funneled a social foam which penetrates every nook and cranny ... [such that all] she is left with are her molecules: society supplies

her with her meaning – and there is nothing between the two’ (Archer 2003, 317). It is what lies ‘between the two’ that interests us in relation to migration and the agrarian question of labor. Breman’s (1996, 238) observations about the motivations of younger generation Dalit migrants in south Gujarat are illustrative:

The new generation of Halpatis seems to grasp every opportunity to escape the agrarian regime. Away from the village and from agriculture, they earn a few extra rupees, mostly countered by greater effort besides the longer journey and work times ... Hired for the day as loader-unloader, these young men and women stand in the back of the truck with their mates and enjoy a freedom that is denied them when working in the fields. For them, that is also the attraction of the urban casual labor markets. They are certainly treated there as commodities, but at least they are not immediately identified and stigmatized as *sala Dubra* (author’s italics, for a derogatory local term applied by upper-caste employers to the Halpatis).<sup>11</sup>

To return to Willis (1981), the thesis of cultural production remains open to the prospect that there ‘can be, in their own way, minor liberations as well as daily events’ – as demonstrated by the foregoing example from Gujarat. Why should this matter? Because, as Willis elaborates:

It is the non-intended results of these strategies – the ways in which ‘existential’ or cultural solutions at their own ‘levels’ and the creative resolutions of life trajectories as they are experienced act to stabilise and produce the system as whole – which connect that liberation to entrapment as daily events too. (1981, 64)

### ***Vidisha and Ujjwala: translocal householding, regional patriarchy, and ‘middleness’***

Vidisha and Ujjwala, the two sisters we previously discussed, exhibit the traits we associate with middle migrants. They arrived in Delhi eight years ago and have lived in the same tiny rented room in an urbanizing village on Delhi’s eastern outskirts. The settlement is still dominated by village landowners from the Gujjar caste, who have capitalized on soaring land values to accumulate large surpluses. The more entrepreneurial among them have channeled these surpluses in constructing row after row of makeshift apartment blocks that warehouse garment workers in the adjacent SEPZ. The rental terms require residents to purchase everyday supplies from the contractor who runs the *kirana* (grocery) shop in the complex and doubles up as rent collector and overseer for the Gujjar landlord. Vidisha and Ujjwala’s room has peeling plaster, no sewage system, and a single light bulb. There is a tiny latrine, cordoned off with a curtain, which leads to an open drain, neither kitchen nor bathroom, just a hole in the ground. The room is in a building with locked gates and four surveillance cameras with more than a hundred rooms rented out to workers like themselves. (A woman and her lover had recently been murdered in one of the rooms by her ‘Bihari’ husband, a migrant, the

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<sup>11</sup>This is similar to Rogaly and Thieme’s (2012, 2095) discussion of the views of young Muslim men in eastern Murshidabad District of West Bengal:

Having one’s own [petty] business as a trader or transporter could involve extremely antisocial hours and, as with wage work, difficult, even dangerous, journeys. Income did not necessarily increase. Yet having a business that enabled life to continue, such as selling date molasses, or hiring out a bullock-pulled cart to transport goods and people, meant not having to put up with food dropped from a height by Hindu employers, or cleaning the floor with cowdung.

sisters told us). The corridors were so dark that in the middle of a bright sunny day it was hard to see much of anything. We stumbled over bikes, street carts, pipes, live electric wires, and strung up laundry. Both sisters work 10–12 hour shifts at a garment factory in the nearby SEPZ. They describe the mechanical and repeated nature of their work: a technical division of labor where the production of a branded T-shirt (Adidas, Reebok, or Polo) is disaggregated into various tasks with 13–17 people working on discrete ‘pieces’ of the T-shirt until its final assembly. In their translocal household, gender roles had been reversed: instead of their father and brother here were two unmarried daughters engaging in wage labor to provision their family in the village as its primary wage earners.

Four or five years ago, Vidisha and Ujjwala resigned from a garment sweatshop on the eve of its closure, tipped off by a friend that they would get compensated three months of salary for doing so. Loaded with the relatively large sum of Rs. 56,000, they returned to their village. It was spent on ‘upgrading our parents unfinished house, then we built a shed for the livestock.’ They stayed in the village for three or four months but felt out of place. ‘There’s nothing to do but jungle work [livestock grazing] there. We’re habituated to going for duty [regular work] now.’ As soon as a friend called from Delhi with news of jobs in a new hosiery unit, they began badgering their parents to let them return. ‘I told my mother a *bhabhi* [sister-in-law] is absolutely necessary for our own marriages,’ Vidisha confided. ‘Who will welcome the bridegrooms’ party otherwise? A *bhabhi* will be knowledgeable (*jaankaar*) about all sorts of things. So, get our brother married first.’

The brother did get married and the sisters paid for his wedding.

Of course, there were major expenses for our brothers’ wedding. After that we told our parents we must return to duty to earn more. ... And then my brother began saying, ‘Let’s get a [motor]bike. Otherwise whenever someone is sick we have to wait hours to take them to the doctor by bus.’ So we got him a bike.

The imperative of social reproduction is mobilized by the brother and the sisters to secure their respective cases. In addition to the distance and delay in reaching a doctor in the village, Ujjwala complained ‘everything’s a pain there – electricity, water.’ She compared this to the ease of ‘buying vegetables right outside our room’ in Delhi.

When we met the sisters for a second time, they were off to their village for Vidisha’s wedding the next day. This was the wedding for which they had saved and saved again, after the expenses on their brother’s wedding and the house modifications, and sent home money, one of their two salaries every month, only to discover, very recently, that their brother and mother had spent most of it. There were tears but that didn’t stop them from enthusiastically showing us their sparkly new saris, bought just for the occasion. They regaled us with stories of their friends at work and showed us selfies with them on their cell phones. The TV was turned on for us. Loudly. Place mattered differently from our normative middle-class expectations. Vidisha and Ujjwala’s ‘home’ is a room with no view but, significantly, has a private hole in the ground for which they pay 200 rupees more in monthly rent because it lets you pee in private. The TV may never sleep when they are home, but it is a window to the world.

Vidisha has seen her husband to be once. She has never been to his village but he presented her a cell phone and they have been chatting. Her husband’s family broke off the engagement after they found out Vidisha works in Delhi, a fact her family had concealed. An ‘auntie’, an older ‘Bihari’ migrant, intervened and told the prospective in-laws that

Vidisha was a 'good girl'. So, after she gets married, Vidisha is reconciled to leading the life of a 'good' new daughter-in-law in her conjugal village, also in Uttar Pradesh; at least, for a while, cooking and serving her in-laws and doing all the farm work. Her husband has promised that after a year or two she can return to Delhi. The younger sister, Ujjwala, then hopes to come back too, to live with her and resume work in the garment factory. Or, she hopes that their mother will prevail over their drunken father to let the next of their four remaining sisters come to the city to work.

'Delhi' signifies something else for Vidisha and Ujjwala. Amazingly, from the peripheral margin where she works, Ujjwala has never been into Delhi with its regal colonial boulevards, Mughal gardens, government enclaves, and glitzy malls. She has gone to a nearby mall, several times, and loves it, but never to one in the city, though she would like to. Vidisha, the elder, has been to central Delhi just twice in eight years: to the zoo and to the huge Swaminarayan temple on the banks of the Yamuna River that opened its doors some years ago. Ujjwala, who is very attractive, and good at her job, is conspicuously self-possessed. Although she likes to wear jeans and t-shirts, she dresses modestly whenever she steps out so as not to be sexually harassed. She tells us that at work she neither flirts nor sucks up to male supervisors even at the risk of losing a promotion. She has a boyfriend and, on one rare occasion, she went away to Agra to see the Taj Mahal with him and a couple of friends. She has been quietly continuing her studies finishing a BA and an MA since moving from the village. She preps on her own and goes back to the provincial town near her village to write the exams, bribing someone to give her the attendance required to sit for the exams.

Vidisha and Ujjwala's relationship to their natal village is marked by contradiction, symptomatic of their 'middleness'. Both sisters experience great satisfaction from being able to contribute to the social reproduction of their family. Ujjwala says, 'If we lived in the village, we'd work in the jungle and earn nothing. We like it here because we can do something for our parents. Give them some joy. We want them to live well, eat good food not 'third quality'. We want to educate our sisters, to get good jobs, to do better than us.' Yet, they miss the open fields of their village, fondly recalling what it smells and feels like to cut verdant green stalks of cattle feed. At the same time, the village weighs on them as the more constrained space where they must follow rigid gender and caste norms – in how they dress, who they talk to, where they go and when – as unmarried sisters and daughters. 'Here, we talk to a boy, laugh together, and everyone knows we are just 'friends'. In the village, if a girl talks to a boy they assume she is dirty (*gandi*). We can't even be 'normal' [Ujjwala employed the English word] there.' Remarkably, their father now defends his daughters when relatives and neighbors try to bad mouth them for working in Delhi. Conspicuously, the only idiom in which he knows to do so – 'these aren't my daughters they're my sons,' he says – re-inscribes the gender binary. Nevertheless, it would be remiss to not acknowledge the 'minor liberations' of Vidisha and Ujjwala's changing aspirations for reproduction and the quietly significant transformations they have wrought in the normative gender and generational expectations of their rural upbringing.

### ***Malika: the reworking of caste and gender***

Malika, around 35 years old, is self-possessed and confident; on the day we met her in Hyderabad, she was dressed in a bright green, brassily embroidered polyester sari,

complimented with bangles, a watch, and a big hand bag. Malika is a beautician with a difference, she used to work in a beauty parlor but now gives women facials, manicures, pedicures, plucks eyebrows, waxes arms and legs, dyes and shampoos hair, all in the comfort of their own homes. She works long hours, providing personalized care to working women on weekends, and stay at-home women during the week. A couple of years ago she bought herself a scooter, and recently learned to drive it, so she no longer depends on her husband to take her to clients. Men in the settlement Malika lives in, may still belittle her as they watch her driving by, but they can no longer demean her family, or taunt: 'What do *these* people know? They lack 'worldliness' (*'tellvi'*).' Malika recalls, 'They used to be so disparaging about us, but now that I am so successful we get shown respect.'

Malika's *raison d'être* for working is her children's futures (cf. Singh 2017). Time and again in her story she returns to their social reproduction as the imperative for her to work so they could 'go to private elementary schools', and then go to 'model' (exorbitant, private) high schools, and 'will do engineering' in college. Malika has had to fight her mother-in-law and brothers-in-law every step of the way to work. Malika is Mangali, a 'backward' caste; barbers, nail-cutters, masseuse, and midwives, Mangali men and women have both provided (ritually 'dirty') personal care services to higher castes in Telangana villages for generations. On migrating to the city, Mangalis signal their rising caste status by proscriptions on women's movement and work 'outside' the home. Yet, Malika was determined. She started by watching TV shows to teach herself embroidery and taking orders for embellishing saris at home. Not satisfied, she borrowed money from her brothers and enrolled in a beauty technician's class, eventually convincing her husband that this was in line with their Mangali caste. Virulent objections and jibes by her in-laws about her wearing *churidar-kurta* 'suits', not saris, to work in a beauty parlor made Malika quit. Eventually, by providing personalized beauty care in other women's homes dressed in a sari ('even though it shows more of the body than suits', she wryly notes) she has re-oriented the traditional caste occupation of Mangalis. Noticing men were demanding beauty treatments too, Malika has taught her husband beauty skills, thereby reorienting the pedagogical script. And, on occasion, she massages and bathes babies, a social reproduction task her female forebears were highly skilled at and that which Malika claims her 'body' tacitly knows.

Malika earns far more than her husband but keeps the pretense of his being the breadwinner by maintaining a joint bank account. Malika is firmly established as a middle migrant now, but it was not always so. She is from a landless family in Nalgonda district, one of the poorest in the country. At 17, she was pulled out of school and married off as her family was destitute. Her husband's family – his parents and brothers – had migrated to Hyderabad from Medak, another desperately poor district, a few years earlier. Malika joined this extended family in the city. Her brothers- and sisters-in-law still complain that she works too hard and is 'too greedy for money,' but her husband has changed. 'My husband now cooks; something he never used to do. If he messes up the kitchen, I yell at him.' It is Malika, moreover, who decided to invest in a house and a plot in Hyderabad and in real estate along the main road leading to a temple in her urbanizing village – a village experiencing a boom as the new state of Telangana promotes it as an answer to Tirupati (one of the richest temples in the world). Females in India are supposed to 'belong' to their marital households after marriage, yet Malika's orientations to the rural remain strong through ties to her sister and brothers in the village. Malika has trained her sister



and sisters-in-law (brothers' wives) to tonsure hair and has now set them up on the main drag to shave the heads of women pilgrims. One could argue that patriarchy and caste continue to orient Malika but that would be missing the remarkable changes in professionalizing personal care work, in the relations of gendered work, in household dynamics, and kinship which she has wrought. By re-orienting vertical male-female relationships of power within households to lateral relationships of care between female in-laws who are kin, Malika highlights the 'minor liberations' of social reproduction.

Malika's changing relationship to her mother-in-law illustrates how cultural production can transform social reproduction, by gradually altering a hierarchical, often cruel kin relationship into a lateral relationship of care and intimacy. Early on, Malika's mother-in-law wanted her to have a third child but refused to pay for a hospital when Malika miscarried in the fifth month of her third pregnancy and nearly bled to death. Malika reasoned that 'to take care of her existing two children well, with so little financial support [from her in-laws], I needed to stop having kids.' Without telling her husband or mother-in-law she did just that. And, she was determined to work; to defy 'their rule that women shouldn't work, even if we had to eat rice with pickle, because we couldn't afford to buy vegetables.'

Her mother-in-law also objected to Malika sending her kids to private schools (when government schools were good enough for her other grandchildren); and she objected to Malika buying 'modern' kitchen appliances like a gas stove, a refrigerator, a blender, and so on, which would have lessened the burdens of daily reproduction, as 'a waste of money.' Yet, toward the end of her life, Malika's mother-in-law, now waning in household authority, came to realize that she had more control over her own food, space, and TV watching if her daughter-in-law went out to work. Her mother-in-law also realized that *she* could learn how to operate new-fangled gadgets – a gas stove, for example – to make tea whenever she wanted. And, that the kids of women who work are not less well behaved. Malika's mother-in-law, for the first time, started helping out with daily reproduction tasks in Malika's house, braiding her granddaughters' hair and telling the kids not to bother Malika when she came home tired after a long day at work. Malika regrets that, 'Just as my mother-in-law started understanding me, she died.' She would have liked to reset her relationship with her mother-in-law more fully. In both their lives the relationship between the two women was finally something other than the hierarchical, normative relationship between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law: it was caring not obligatory or oppressive.

An intersectional analysis of the dynamics of social reproduction reveals how Malika has re-scripted the caste-based occupation of a rural Mangali woman in the city. As a petty entrepreneur, she has remade the gendered space of her own home, overcome the gendered space of settlement by traveling all over the city on her 'scooty' [scooter], and converted the gendered space of her clients' homes into work spaces. Malika's acts of cultural production have renovated the norms of social reproduction without altogether upending them: on the one hand, she has displaced the regulations of patriarchy; on the other hand, anticipation of a better future for her children remains the primary force that animates her (self-)inventive efforts. She has been able to overcome the grind of daily reproductive work and the discourse that sustains it. But it has taken its toll. Malika tells us:

My dreams of coming to the city and making my own identity have been fulfilled. However, it's still so difficult for a woman to work ... she has to struggle a lot against all those people out

there trying to stop her. I struggled a lot. But I kept persevering. Society's changed. But not enough. If a woman stops struggling against patriarchal challenges, change in society will come to a standstill (*unta aagipotadi*).'

### **Putli: the vexed trajectory of social reproduction**

Petite and attractive, Putli bears herself with grace. Though 29, she looks much younger. A contract worker, she cleans the toilets at a girl's hostel on the University of Delhi campus. She lives in a nearby settlement, in an immaculately clean and tidy one-room, with a shared water pipe and toilet. One of the millions of rural migrant women who do commodified social reproduction work in the city, Putli is relatively well-paid (compared to women who work in private households) though her job is insecure. A relatively 'high' caste Rajput she hails from a village in Bihar. At the age of 17, her mother arranged Putli's marriage to Mahesh, also a Rajput, from a village at some distance from Putli's. Mahesh was visiting his aunt in Putli's natal village (her *mai*ke), and the aunt thought it was a good idea to get them married. Putli's mother, landless, impoverished, and with a drunken, ailing husband, agreed. 'Caste is girl' (*ladki jaat hai*), Putli explains. It is through marriage and kinship that caste is reproduced. If her father had died, and her mother had brought along Putli, 'a single, unmarried daughter' to the city, reasons Putli, she would have been accused of 'living by prostituting me'. 'It was due to my *majboori* (utter helplessness), that my mother [not an elder male] negotiated my marriage.' After a simple short ceremony, in a temple, Putli went straight on to live with her in-laws. 'I'd have liked a wedding with pomp and glitter, just like everybody else,' she says. 'I'm still sad'.

Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) offers a model of how bodies become oriented by the ways they take up time and space. When we are orientated, we follow familiar lines. 'Considering the politics of the straight line,' Ahmad writes, 'helps us rethink the relationship between inheritance (the lines that are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line)' (2006, 555). Putli's mother followed the straight lines of caste and patriarchy in getting her daughter married. If she hadn't, the social consequences could have been dire: 'If you don't have anyone, people throw sludge at you,' Putli remarked.

On arrival in her marital home (*sasuraal*), Putli too followed the straight lines of patriarchy and caste. 'Rajput women don't work outside the house', Putli stated. 'Women work only inside, and men work outside. In my in-laws' house, I always wore a sari. In front of the men, and whenever I went out, I always covered my head with my *ghunghat* (sari). I've never spoken straight to my eldest brother-in-law. Or sat on a bed in front of my in-laws.' In following these practices so dutifully, Putli conveys how her bodily comportment was tacitly oriented by the lines of caste and patriarchy. Putli also remembers her marital house as a hellhole of never-ending physical reproductive work. 'It was a big house. Lots of people.' She spent from sun up to sun down every single day doing all the cleaning, cooking, washing the dirty clothes, dirty cooking pots and everyone's dirty plates, with no absolutely no respite. The house was a prison of discord, she was taunted continuously, and her in-laws were uncaring. 'No one as much as asked if I'd eaten.' Putli escaped, finally convincing her migrating husband to take her along, and has not been back for a while.

Yet her orientation to inhabiting the world as a high caste Rajput, a woman, a married woman, still powerfully regulates her. The physical impress of space on bodies is palpable

in Putli's loathing for her paid job of cleaning toilets. It is not what high caste Rajput women do. The unspoken here is that this is 'outside' work that Balmikis (formerly 'untouchable' caste people) do. So unclean is the work and so strong the feelings it elicits in Putli, that she has not told anyone in her natal or marital villages what her job is. Putli's own orientations to the straight lines of caste and patriarchy – the ways she tacitly 'knows' how to follow the lines – lead her to knowing when they are not being followed. She complains,

My brother's wife doesn't know how to behave properly. Here [in Delhi] it is OK but in the village it will be [considered] disrespectful. I've tried to teach her – don't call your mother-in-law or husband *tum* (the informal version of 'you'), don't sit on the bed in front of your mother-in-law, you can sit on the bed with your younger brother-in-law's wife or husband's younger sister, but not with elders. When my own mother-in-law or sisters-in-law returned from their natal homes, I used to wash their feet before serving them food.

Here the limits of cultural production become apparent as Putli disciplines her sister-in-law into embracing the norms of gendered respectability befitting a Rajput woman – something the girl has not been properly socialized into by her own family and is unlikely to get in the city, in Putli's critical assessment.

But orientations which follow the straight lines of caste and patriarchy are neither Putli's or her mother's full stories. Again, Sara Ahmad is provocative when she suggests that when we are orientated we may not even notice that we are. We may not even 'think' to think about this point. Consequently, when we experience disorientation, we may notice orientation as something we do not have. Disorientations could be emotional, psychological, or physical, perceived in the body's exterior movements and in the interior movements of thought which move bodies in certain ways, down certain paths. Putli's life-world after her marriage to Mahesh has been one of unrelenting physical and mental abuse. He drinks and beats her up. Time and time again. So violent is he that their son, now 10, has often tried to save his mother, banging on neighbors' doors for help before his drunken father killed her, counseling her to run away before she gets dragged into the street by her hair and her clothes torn asunder once again, pleading with Putli to please kill him – the son – before she is murdered or commits suicide herself. Putli has run away from Mahesh multiple times.

Often, she has returned to her *maike*, her natal village, for succor, economic support, and regeneration (in many of our oral histories, women's natal homes continued to be places of refuge, even in north India, where village exogamous marriage leads to the attenuation of these ties).<sup>12</sup> Once she left to live in Hyderabad for six months, supported by 'a friend'. The male friend (*dost*) and Putli shared '*lagaav*' (attachment). 'He wasn't that attractive to look at', she says, 'but he had good qualities, he was thoughtful and loving. I'll always wish my husband was like him.' We witness in this extraordinary account the 'minor

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<sup>12</sup>Grover (2009, 9n11) notes,

There is no specific Hindi term for the married daughter's right to shelter in the parental home. The phrase 'to sit in the *pihar* (natal home)' comes closest to signifying the practice of absenting oneself from the conjugal home when confronted with marital difficulties.

She goes to note that:

Among the urban poor in north India, refuge in the natal home is thus recognised as a 'right', a moral and social entitlement possessed by a woman in an arranged marriage, a right that remains even after her parents' death, albeit in an attenuated form. (2009, 12)

liberations' of cultural production that Willis (1981) foregrounds. Putli makes us aware just how far she went from the point zero of orientation – her marital house in village Bihar – from where her world unfolds. Literally and metaphorically blinkered by her head-covering 'there' – 'I didn't know my way around that village because I never went out' – she moved to a completely different universe, a 'here' of her own dwelling, to which she traveled, where she loved another man, and lived in a far-away state. Putli never hid her intimate relationship with her *dost* from her mother or brothers. Her mother told her, 'If you like someone, go ahead and marry him.' But Putli was unable to resist the pull of normative social reproduction. She recalls,

He wanted to marry me, but I said no. My mother is twice married [the second time to an already married Dalit man Putli disapproves of]. If I had married twice too what would people in my (maternal) village say? The loss of respectability would be crippling for my brothers and paternal uncles. With him [the *dost*], there was no problem with his caste [he's Rajput too]. But he wasn't prepared to marry me with my child. At times he'd say, give the boy to Mahesh.

The multiple straight lines of patriliney – her uncle's, her brother's, her male friend's – re-orient Putli away from marrying her *dost*. Nevertheless, she savors the memory of that slice of time.

Putli's husband found her at the *dost's* and dragged her back to live with him, on the outskirts of Hyderabad. His abusive behavior got worse. She ran away again, this time to Delhi and lived there, working for the first time in her life as a domestic in private houses to feed her son and herself. Two years went by when one day word came from the village that her husband had died. Hearing this, Putli's mother made Putli go through the rituals of widowhood, physically stripping off her *bindi*, her *sindhur*, her bangles, her toe rings. Engulfed by the darkness of widowhood the press of grief on Putli's body, as she tells it, guided Putli's subsequent lines of action. On learning that her husband had staged his death, and was alive after all, she allowed him back. The disorientation, the feeling of being so out of place, pushed Putli back to the familiar. But it's also a conjugal relationship, improbably, filled with love and desire. For Putli considers her husband 'beautiful, fair, articulate, capable ... even though I have never lived peacefully with him.' She adds, 'Now I have a husband. I'm married to him. We may fight but I have respectability in the village; in the city.' Whenever he gets drunk he still calls her a 'dirty slut' (*gandi aurat*). But she doesn't let the insult stick. She knows 'people in her *maike* will tell him she is a good woman.'<sup>13</sup> She believes this in her own bones. She's had an extra-marital relationship with a male who is not her husband, everyone knows about it, and yet, remarkably, she is not defined nor is her body defiled by physical intimacy with another man.

In significant ways, Putli has dislodged the drudge of social reproduction she was 'born' into and that she inherited. She laughs at the memory of her first train journey,

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<sup>13</sup>There are striking similarities between Putli's account and the case of Lata (a low caste Balmiki woman) in Shalini Grover's study of marriage, love, and kinship support among poor women in Delhi. Lata's husband Rajbir drinks, beats her, and constantly accuses her of having affairs. Lata seeks shelter in her nearby natal home, but eventually decides to return to Rajbir. She explains her decision thus:

He's come here many times to ask about me. He also loves me. At such times it becomes difficult for the children. My parents keep asking why I put up with him ... but eventually I may not inherit anything from them. And what if in the future Rajbir sells our *jhuggi* and absconds? I will be left in the lurch. Neither do I want to terminate my relationship with him. (Grover 2009, 12)

accompanying her husband for the first time to Siliguri from Bihar when she didn't know where or how to pee nor how to ask him, a relative stranger at the time, what to do. Now she confidently takes trains and travels. Once, Putli transgressed the patriarchal prohibitions of touch and of desire within marriage by living intimately with a man who was not her husband. Putli has broken the caste phenomenology of touching shit and working outside the home as well but is repulsed by her stigmatized job even as it provides her food on the table, a future for her son, and a modicum of protection from her husband. In these dialectics of cultural production and social reproduction lie the 'in between' practices which hint at the minor politics that ferments within the agrarian question of labor.

## Conclusion

Bernstein (2004, 204–5) proposes that the agrarian question today is the question of labor, and one that is riven by 'forms of differentiation' as well as 'oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste and ethnicity' as workers strive for social reproduction. Our paper pries open these claims, employing the life histories of four working-class women of rural origin, with disparate modes of arrival in the city, to investigate lived forms of differentiation within the informal economy, the social division of labor as mediated by 'intersecting lines' of difference, and, crucially, the slippages and dynamism within structures of social reproduction that straddle the urban and the rural.

We introduce the term 'middle migrants' to characterize households in the urban informal economy that have managed to establish a foothold in cities and become 'stayers' (Anh et al. 2012). While there is no single template by which households are able to manage this, middle migrants remain enmeshed in their rural lives through translocal householding and cultural dispositions to difference, especially those of regional patriarchy, caste and generation. By shifting the focus to the actual conditions in which labor is (re)produced for the informal economy we question a too easy leap from the characterization of the informal economy as intrinsically capitalist to households in the 'middle' (as compared to, say, seasonal migrants) as intrinsically petty bourgeois. Labor is produced, as our life histories reveal, through social processes which are meaningful, even as it is produced in a necessary and contradictory relationship to capital. Middle migrants may be able to meet the demands of simple reproduction and even accumulate small surpluses. But their lives continue to be marked by hardship and uncertainty.

The dynamic nature of social reproduction in translocal households is an important insight that emerges from our life histories with middle migrants. By taking an intersectional approach to the social reproduction of labor in these households, we are able to uncover which specific relations women migrants are orientated to inhabit, how lines of difference are co-produced, and what the possibilities are for displacing normative hierarchies. We show how 'minor liberations' can be extraordinary achievements from the situated perspective of patriarchal, caste, generational, and gender subordination. In recasting the agrarian question of labor in urban India as questions of social reproduction *and* cultural production we demonstrate how agrarian provenance shapes the social reproduction strategies of rural-to-urban migrants. We contribute to the scholarship on translocal householding by considering the difference that difference makes.

By muddying our conceptual sureties, which primarily recognize social reproduction in relation to labor and capitalism, we are able to pose a series of questions for agrarian marxism today: How do the strategies of those who inhabit the middle in urban India provide insights into ongoing transformations in regional patriarchies, feminities, masculinities, and caste oppression? What kinds of cultural work are necessary and possible within the nooks and crannies of social reproduction in urban and rural India? What kinds of resources can support the networks of sociality and care that will allow small practices of dissent and disorientation to accumulate into wider societal transformations? To once more invoke Paul Willis:

The action of dominant *Cultural Production* and *Reproduction* is often to break up and fragment subordinate *Cultural Production*. The dominant group claims for its own discourse the provenance of the public, the long term, the legitimate, the explicit and the rationally logical – we may say history itself. Subordinate Cultural Production is profoundly private, informal and articulated in the immediate, the practical, the demonstrated, and the narrative – implicit logic which hardly survive even beyond their transient embodiments, never mind for history. The counter-hegemonic principle must therefore concern itself with the formation and varied identity of the class itself and of what is the commonality of oppressed groups before concerning itself with struggle directly – maintaining the unity and scope of *Cultural Production* that dominant forms seek to break up. (1981, 65; italics in the original)

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