

“WE EARN LESS THAN WE EAT:
FOOD, FARMING, AND THE CARING FAMILY IN BIHAR, INDIA”

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This dissertation examines food and farming practices in rural Bihar, India. Given changes in the agrarian economy and rapid food inflation, rural Biharis feel their livelihoods under threat. The title quote – “we earn less than we eat” – points to a shifting calculus for rural households in which well-being is framed in terms of off-farm income rather than agricultural output. Although the recent intensification of Green Revolution agricultural practices has boosted rural incomes, farmers grapple with the accelerated capitalization of rural life in which land, seed, and labor are increasingly commodified. As a result, farmers who depend on the land for their subsistence must prepare for a future beyond agriculture.

I argue that food and farming practices provide a lens onto how small-scale farming families articulate an ethics of care in the face of precarious rural conditions. In rural Bihar, people’s aspirations and anxieties center on the family and are often expressed through the idiom of food. Given local histories of food insecurity, I frame care primarily in terms of food practices—the daily work of farming, feeding, and commensal eating that sustains the family. The forms that care assumes vary according to gender, caste, and role in the family. Attending to the logics of care thus points to neglect – whose interests can be ignored, which bodies can be put at risk – and the ways that violence is not separate from care but often mingled with it.

This ethnography attends to Biharis’ embodied experiences as a means of conjuring their sense of insecurity and enactments of care. The sensuous body – with all its hungers, labors, and

vulnerabilities – sheds light on the intimate ways that people experience larger political economic formations. This project challenges the surplus/scarcity dichotomy that often frames scholarship on the larger global food economy. I complicate this binary by showing how sensations of poverty and abundance, pleasure and dissatisfaction, coexist within a single community, household, and even a single person. In turning to the sensations and appetites of the body, I show how people strive to sustain the family and refuse the logics of scarcity that govern their lives.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Hayden Seth Kantor is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Anthropology at Cornell University. He received a M.A. from the University of Chicago in 2008 and a B.A. from Duke University in 2005.

For Roanne

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In writing this dissertation, I have accumulated many debts.

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NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

I have followed the IAST system for transliterating Hindi and Magahi words in the Devanagari script into English. To denote pluralizations of South Asian words, I have added an unitalicized *s* to these words. Where a Hindi word has a widely recognized spelling in English – such as *bazaar*, *chai*, or *sari* – I have followed the popular convention. Italicized English words – such as *government*, *labor*, *tension* – denote English loanwords adopted by South Asian speakers.

Chapter 1

Introduction

There was a knock at the door.

I got up from my desk and opened it.

Anjali Kumari stood on the top step. She was a tall, bright 11-year-old girl. Her father, Rakesh Kumar, was my host in the village of Amalpur, in the North Indian state of Bihar's Nalanda district.¹

It was a cold December day. The sun had failed to penetrate the clouds that hung low and heavy in the sky. This was a busy agricultural period, during which farmers rushed to complete the paddy harvest and sow the winter crops—wheat, lentils, and mustard seed. But on such an overcast, chilly day, farmers typically paused their work rather than tempt sickness. So the road in front of my house was quiet, with fewer trucks, bicyclists, and pedestrians passing from the villages beyond Amalpur to the shops on the main road. Behind Anjali, a neighbor's buffalo bellowed, loud and long. Just out of view, the communal hand pump screeched as another neighbor filled her bucket.

“Hayden *uncle*,” Anjali said, “Can you give us some newspaper? Ma is making something.”

I nodded and turned to my shelf behind me. Upon my arrival in the village, I had subscribed to the Hindi newspaper, *Dainik Jagran* (The Daily Awakening). Each morning, a bicycle deliveryman dropped the paper at my door. My neighbors passed it around, surveying the local news bulletins and announcements for government jobs. Instead of discarding it when I was

¹ Following standard anthropological practice, I have used pseudonyms for the names of the villages and neighborhoods in this study.

finished, my hosts had advised me to save the newspaper, which I might sell by the bundle to a scavenger, or put to some other use.

The newspaper headlines recorded the machinations of party politics and the rollout of new government programs. However, these state initiatives and party squabbles often seemed remote from life in this small farming village. For instance, the much-heralded “Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project,” known locally as JEEViKA, featured a US \$70 million commitment from the World Bank. The project aimed to improve rural livelihoods for women and empower the poor in the project area, a broad swath covering almost three million people in 4,000 villages, including Amalpur. But despite the fanfare and good intentions, the project did not seem to have much lasting impact on the economic circumstances of the village. Life in Amalpur continued much as it had before.

Given the inadequacies of development programs, if not outright state neglect, I had become interested in a different sort of politics and economics. My time living in the village had drawn my attention to the daily concerns of my neighbors’ lives—the ongoing work of providing for the household as they grapple with the economic changes underway in Bihar. What does it mean to eat well when the family’s livelihood is threatened?

I handed Anjali the stack of newspapers. She clasped it in both arms, and trotted around the corner to her house. I followed her out the door to see what they were doing.

Rakesh’s joint family household lived in the sturdily built brick house, plastered and painted blue, located at the southern edge of the village. A joint family is an extended family arrangement in South Asia in which multiple generations live together in a patrilocal residence. Its defining feature is that brothers continue to live together into adulthood, pooling their economic resources. While this family structure has often been described as a traditional one,

rural Biharis underscore the importance of mutual aid for managing their contemporary economic situation. This household included at eight people—Rakesh, his wife and two children, his widowed mother, and three younger siblings. Two other brothers lived outside the village—one for work and one for study. They were a Bhumihars, the dominant caste of landowners in the village.

Inside the open-air courtyard (*āṃgan*) that served as their central living space, everyone in the family was bundled up in sweaters and shawls to shield themselves from the cold. Even though they had halted the agricultural work, the daily labor of providing for the household remained. From the open-air kitchen on the roof wafted down the aroma and hisses of the pressure cooker—filled with the *dāl* (lentils) for the family’s lunch. Rakesh’s wife Rima Devi sat before the hearth (*cūlhā*), tending to the fire.

Below, on one side of the courtyard, two of Rakesh’s siblings, his sister Arati Kumari and his brother Ramesh Kumar, crouched over a tarp upon which they had spread several weeks’ worth of grain from last season’s harvest. Once washed, the two of them picked through the wheat kernels, removing stray stalks, pebbles, and debris. The work was exacting, consuming most of the morning, straining their backs and arms. Once the grain dried in the sun, whenever it returned, Ramesh would bring a sack by bicycle to the mill in a nearby town.

On the other side of the room, Krishan Kant, another of Rakesh’s brothers, was seated on a bench, wrapping the newspapers so that they covered several large baskets (*tokarī*). His 60-year-old mother, Krishna Devi – known to all in the family as Ma – sat next to him on the floor. She was laboring over a wide metal dish, in which she had mixed *ātā* (wheat flour) with water, and was stirring it into a viscous mixture. She explained that she was making a paste that, when heated over fire, would act as a binding for their homemade papier-mache.

They were making a decorative gift basket. Arati, Krishna Devi's only daughter, would be traveling in a few days to visit her in-laws. She had married the previous year, and was in the process of shifting to their house. This was a gradual process, in part because it took time to arrange the substantial dowry payment. Arati visited them for a few weeks, and then returned, slowly adjusting to her new life. Each trip required gifts of sweets (*mīṭha*) to reinforce the warm relationship between the two families. In addition to sending well-made foods, the presentation was important as well.

“Once this dries,” Krishna Devi said, not looking up from the gelatinous mixture, “then we'll paint it. The baskets should be colorful!” In India, the color red was particularly auspicious for weddings. “Then we will call an artisan (*mistrī*) to prepare the sweets.” And indeed the next day the artisan arrived, and set up a bubbling pot of oil on a stove in the grove behind the house.

This multi-day process of preparing the gift for their Arati's in-laws required considerable time and expense. Despite the effort involved, it was a matter of etiquette, as the gifts expressed their respect and regard for their new relations. But more than mere obligation, their diligence in fashioning the festive baskets reflected how invested they were in providing Arati with a good marriage. They sent most of the sweets along with Arati so that she could present them to her affines upon her arrival. They kept a small portion to distribute to relatives, friends, and neighbors in the village to celebrate the happy occasion. This elaborate preparation of food was crucial to consolidating ties in the village and beyond.

As they worked, Krishan Kant turned to me and grinned. “This is our *deśī technology!*” he said, stringing together the Hindi word for “country,” “provincial,” or “local” with the English word. Whenever he and I went out together, whether walking in the fields or in the markets, he was quick to point out instances of what he took to be Bihari ingenuity. Rural people in this area,

he insisted, have a native resourcefulness—they know how to extract value out of whatever materials are available in the surrounding environment. To be Bihari, according to Krishan Kant, is to have inherited the embodied practices necessary for survival in the face of adversity.

Families in Amalpur felt that their lives were precarious. The newspapers that they repurposed brought regular reports of rapidly escalating prices. Even as Bihar's economy had grown in the last few years, food inflation on the order of 10% per annum had erased many of these gains. People in the village often complained about the hardship caused by increased expenditure for basic foods like onions, tomatoes, and vegetables. In addition, they confronted the rising price of necessary agricultural inputs, such as hybrid seeds, fertilizer, and diesel fuel. The cost of other essential consumer goods had risen as well. Taken together, these mounting costs provided evidence of what I call the accelerated capitalization of rural life—a sense among rural Biharis that their livelihoods were increasingly subject to the pressures of the market.

Over the last two decades, the intensification of Green Revolution agricultural practices has boosted crop yields. As a result, the staple grains that they grew on their land had never been more abundant or cheaper. Like most small-scale farming families in Amalpur, Rakesh's family grew rice, wheat, lentils, potatoes, and mustard on six *bīghās* (2.4 hectares) of land. They were able to stock away a full year's supply of grain. For this reason, they could divert excess flour towards the crafts project without a second thought. But although they ate much of what they grew and sold the surplus, they did not benefit from the surge in food prices. Those gains accrued to farmers who cultivated vegetables on a large-scale and sold them commercially. In fact, the recent bout of food inflation had stressed their budget because they regularly purchased vegetables in the market for household consumption.

Despite their agricultural output and full storerooms, people worried about securing their bodily well-being and family's future. People in Amalpur filled their stomachs with a narrow range of starchy staples that they produced themselves—rice, wheat, and potatoes. But there was an implicit and largely unremarked upon distinction between these staple foods, which a person might consume in almost unlimited quantities, and expensive specialty foods, such as greens, fruits, and nuts, whose consumption was carefully rationed. They relished the wholesome, inexpensive seasonal produce grown on local fields. Yet their access to these foods varied with the season and was thus limited.

People in Amalpur often expressed their anxieties about providing for the household through the idiom of food. They spoke of needing to fill their bellies (*peṭ bharnā*), or obtain their daily bread (*rozī-rotī*)—phrases that reflected local histories and contemporary anxieties about food insecurity in Bihar. In fact, I found that people there were neither starving nor fully sated, neither thriving nor in crisis. Rather, they inhabited a tenuous middle ground in which they had enough to eat at present but were also deeply concerned about the future.

That day, Krishan Kant surveyed the flurry of activity in the sparsely furnished courtyard, turned to me, and sighed. “We earn less than we eat, for this reason we Biharis are poor” (*kamānā kam, khānā zyādā, isaliye ham Bihārī log garīb haim*). By juxtaposing earning and eating, production and consumption, Krishan Kant's comment elucidated the struggles of their household, and of the state of Bihar as a whole. His words – “we earn less than we eat” – framed the household budget as an equation that Biharis, against the odds, seek to balance. This reflects a shift in the political economy of rural India in which families calculated poverty and well-being in terms of off-farm income rather than agricultural output. Although they were grounded in

village life and grew much of what they ate, the fate of the household was nevertheless bound up with their earning power.

The second half of Krishan Kant’s statement – “for this reason we Biharis are poor” – invoked the travails of their home state.² In mentioning Bihar, he offered an explanation for the region’s reputation for intractable poverty. In India, the word Bihar itself has become a metonym for poverty, corruption, and backwardness—what Aravind Adiga in his novel *The White Tiger* calls “the Darkness” (Adiga 2008, 11-12). Bihar is one of the poorest states in India, with a per capita income one quarter of the national average (Government of India 2015). It has perennially struggled with floods, drought, and deprivation. Bihar’s reputation for lawlessness hardened under the administration of Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav in the 1990s, a period widely known as a “Jungle Raj” (“*jāngal rāj*”), or “Law of the Jungle.” Under the subsequent administration of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the security outlook improved, and in recent years the state has achieved a sustained stretch of double-digit economic growth.

But given the poor infrastructure and weak institutions, rural Biharis were anxious about whether they would share in this new prosperity. Of the state’s population of roughly 100 million people, almost 90% lived in rural areas and 80% were engaged in small-scale agriculture (Government of India 2011). Bihari farmers cultivated the land primarily for their own subsistence, and sold the surplus in the market. Nalanda district, home to approximately three million people, exemplified many of the trends. It ranked as one of the poorer districts in India,

² Perhaps due to its struggles, Bihar has been comparatively understudied in the scholarship on India. Historians have detailed the production of underdevelopment in the region, the state’s role in the independence movement, conflicts over agrarian reforms (Jha 1980; Das 1983; Mitra 1985; Frankel 1989; Yang 1989; Damodaran 1990; Prakash 1990; Damodaran 1992; Das 1992; Singh 1992; Ram 1997; Yang 1998; Jha 2003; Singh 2006; Jha 2012; Boyk 2015). Anthropologists have produced ethnographies that reflect the changing dynamics of rural life (Jha 1991; Gottschalk 2000; Chakravarti 2001; Jha 2004; Rodgers and Rodgers 2011; Witsoe 2011; Witsoe 2013). I build on this body of scholarship as I examine how rural Biharis care for their families as they live within larger political economic structures.

but squarely in the middle for districts in Bihar according to per capita income, crime, and agricultural productivity (Government of India 2011). For years, it was part of the so-called “Red Corridor” of districts affected by anti-state Naxalite movement, though that threat had largely subsided by the time I arrived.

From Krishan Kant’s perspective, Biharis grappled with not only the scarcity of the agrarian environment but also the precarity of the labor market. His comment about earning too little (*kamānā kam*) underscored widespread anxieties about unemployment and having enough money—that there were too few rupees to feed the family. Most households in the village relied on some form of off-farm income to meet their rising expenses. But because there was little work to be found locally, many men migrated to distant states for employment.

At the same time, his comment about eating too much (*khānā zyādā*) resonated with two popular representations of Bihar, advanced both by outsiders and by Biharis themselves. First, that Bihar suffered from overpopulation—that there were simply too many mouths to feed, too much competition for scarce resources. Second, that Bihar was inhabited by irresponsible subjects with undisciplined appetites—that a single mouth ate too much. In Bihar, those who consume beyond their means were said to lack self-control. Likewise, those who did not contribute to the household were said to be lazy or useless. Such discourses reflected a sense of moral failure rooted in economic failure.

This was not just a concern for the state as a whole, but operated at the level of the family as well. For many of the rural Biharis I met, the family was the horizon of their lives. Providing for the family – and all the obligations, joys, and frustrations bound up with that effort – took up much of their time and energy. Given their circumstances, they confronted the question of what a family was, how to organize the household, and how to preserve it. In the case of Rakesh’s

family, despite their strained finances, they believed that they were better off as a joint family household instead of separate nuclear family units. They emphasized their own self-provisioning capacity as central to their ability to keeping the household together.

How do people sustain the family as they confront the precarity of rural life? Rather than instantiate narratives about Bihari poverty and dysfunction, I propose reading Bihar otherwise. I do so by tracing the way that people articulated their ethics of care for their family through their food practices. Rural Bihar has often been framed in terms of its production or its hunger. But such a narrow focus occludes other dimensions of life and sources of meaning. Rural Biharis, I found, articulate their own food ethics, their own conception of what it means to eat well. This is not a situation of “bare life” (Agamben 1998). The question that they face is not whether they have enough food to survive in some abstract sense, but whether they have enough to provide for the family in culturally sanctioned ways. These ideas are grounded in bodily sensations of pleasure and dissatisfaction. They are rooted in the intimacies of family life, and in the context of ties to kin and neighbors in the village.

Food practices provide the ideal lens for showing how rural Biharis advance an ethics of care because food and agriculture are located at the center of their daily activities. I use the term food practices to encompass, in the broadest possible sense, the diverse forms of human activity that are part of providing for the household. This term blurs the lines between production and consumption, and more specifically, between agriculture and domestic labor. I found that in practice these two spheres are not easily disentangled. Both men and women spend a large portion of their day on food—growing it, procuring it, and preparing it. Food is at the crux of their anxieties and aspirations for the family. Food practices elucidate power dynamics within the household and the meanings of family. A hot plate of *rotī-sabzī* (bread and vegetables) at the end

of the long day of work is the material through which people perform and read their obligations, entitlements, and status to each other. People's food practices thus shed light on notions of care for the self and for others, and how these ideals are articulated and negotiated given the insecurity of rural life.

Precarity

Rather than starting with an objective definition of poverty, I begin by attending to rural Biharis' own sensations of precarity. To focus on poverty or scarcity, I argue, would lead me toward an audit of household budgets and storerooms, and lead me away from questions about the embodied experiences and ethics of rural life. To write about poverty requires adopting the language of bureaucratic programs and interventions, and the logics that attempt to quantify suffering and reduce human experience to a number. People in Amalpur, however, have enough to eat, but still feel profoundly insecure. An accounting of poverty, then, effaces the aspirations, pressures, and ethics that mark their lives.

An ethnography of rural precarity, on the other hand, takes as its object people's embodied sensations of vulnerability. It foregrounds how rural Biharis embodied their marginalized position within Bihar and India's political economy. At the same time, I argue that examining precarity foregrounds the ways that people have responded to these circumstances. How do they endure and ameliorate their circumstances? In the case of rural Bihar, this means drawing out the practices of care and resourcefulness that mark everyday life. In the absence of adequate care on the part of the state, people in rural Bihar sought to care for their families. I trace the various forms of labor – in fields, kitchens, and points in between – that sustain the

household. In doing so, I underscore the resources, capacities, and relationships that they have cultivated in this effort.

To express the pervasive and deep-seated insecurity felt by many people against the backdrop of late capitalism, in recent years scholars have turned to the concept of precarity and precarious life. This concept has gained prominence through Judith Butler's work on forms of violence in the contemporary world (Butler 2004; Butler 2009; Butler 2012). Precarity, Butler writes, "designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009, 25). Butler distinguishes between "precariousness," which reflects to vulnerability of all people's lives, and "precarity," which underscores the heightened and politically produced vulnerability of some people's lives (van Wyk 2015).

The economist Guy Standing has coined the term "the precariat" to describe the emergence of a social class that experiences chronic contingency in the labor market (Standing 2011). Anthropologists have also drawn on the concept of precarity as part of a broader literature addressing the forms of insecurity generated by neoliberalism and post-Fordist economies (cf. Allison 2013). As Andrea Muehlebach observes, "Precarity, in short, is a shorthand for those of us documenting the multiple forms of nightmarish dispossession and injury that our age entails" (Muehlebach 2013, 298). To this end, Hayder Al-Mohammad emphasizes precariousness as a "methodological orientation" attentive to the haphazard struggles and exposedness of life (Al-Mohammad 2012, 600). Precarity thus provides the language for describing those who, in different ways, experience economic uncertainty and have been robbed of a predictable future.

Certainly, rural Bihar is a place where this vulnerability is particularly pronounced. Past experiences of neglect, ongoing political dysfunction, and anticipated environmental disruption

all rendered Bihari lives insecure. As with many places in rural India, living in Bihar means enduring degraded infrastructure, reduced access to social services, and marginalization vis-à-vis the rest of the country. This is true regardless of social position, income, or landholdings. But it is also important to underscore the extent to which Bihari society is riven by deep divisions between rich and poor, upper caste and lower caste, men and women. Those at the bottom of social hierarchy are exposed to extreme forms of violence. Yet even people from dominant groups who enjoyed a measure of security, like Rakesh's family, feel that their lives might be upended at any moment by accident or calamity. By focusing on their unease, I show how the security of rural life was eroding at this juncture.

Drawing on the experience of rural Bihar, I advance three arguments with respect to the anthropological literature on precarity: First, I attend to local articulations of precarity, how this sense of vulnerability manifests itself in the rural Bihari world. In doing so, I show how precarity is often compounded by multiple vulnerabilities. Second, I focus on how sensations of precarity become embodied and materialized in everyday practice. Third, I argue for attending to the ways that people have responded to these precarious conditions through an ethics of care.

Although precarity is a widely felt expression of the insecurity that has resulted from the reorganization of the global economy, anthropology provides a situated vantage point for how these political economic developments give rise to new social formations and ways of being in the world. Muehlebach underscores the importance of approaches that “provincialize universalizing claims about precarity by pointing to how the contemporary sensorium is culturally and historically mediated—grounded in local vernaculars of labor, family, society, wealth, desire, and loss” (Muehlebach 2013, 298). To this end, I found that rural Biharis often articulated their vulnerability by drawing on the concept *asthāyī*, a Hindi word meaning tenuous,

unstable, or of short duration. They contrasted this with the word *stāyī*, meaning stable, reliable, or permanent. People used this concept to refer to multiple areas of life. While most studies of precarity have focused on contingency in the labor market, these conditions of vulnerability pertain both to their tenuous livelihoods in the agricultural sector and off-farm employment.

In rural Bihar, one form of precarity begets another, creating a cascade that pitches rural people into increasingly vulnerable situations with very material consequences (cf. Allison 2013, 9). Dispossession from the land, for instance, forces people into an uncertain labor market. This entails dangerous work activities, and exposure to risky modes of transportation. Rather than eating wholesome food grown on one's own land, urban migrants consume foods and spices of unknown origin. The forces propelling these trends are diffuse. As such, agency and cause are hard to assign—gradual dispossession from land and rapid food inflation; corruption, crime, and caste conflict; political unrest and poor infrastructure. These layered threats produce a gathering sense of pressure, of a life hemmed in on all sides.

In the literature on South Asia, scholars have highlighted people's capacity to endure difficult circumstances, whether expressed as the need to "*adjust*" (Mehta 2004) or as "*timepass*" (Jeffrey 2010). In urban areas, both the middle-class and the poor find themselves in a visceral competition over space (Kaviraj 1997; Bavskar 2003; Anjaria 2011; Vora 2013; Ray 2014; Weinstein 2014). For rural India, meanwhile, scholars have a long-standing attention to stagnation and instability (Pandian 2009; Jeffrey 2010; Vasavi 2012; Bear 2015; Singh 2015). In this view, precarity emerges neither as a state of exception, nor solely the realm of the poor or the result of calamity, but something with which all Indians as postcolonial subjects must grapple. To this end, Veena Das and Kim Fortun have both described how moments of crisis and

experiences of violence cannot be bound by space and time, but seep into the fabric of everyday life (Fortun 2001; Das 2007).

What, then, are the spatial and temporal coordinates of a precarious life in Bihar? Ghassan Hage has coined the term “stuckedness” to describe how people inhabit “conditions of permanent crisis” (Hage 2009, 97). Hage notes that this “stuckedness” is not simply a state of disability or a sense of immobility, but that for many people there is valor in endurance and weathering the crisis. Erick Harms, too, has emphasized temporal uncertainty and waiting as a means of inhabiting the world (Harms 2013, 350). Similarly, I attend to the spatial dynamics of precarity in rural Bihar on both a macro and micro scale. I underscore the forms of mobility, both literal and figurative, that enable people to move through the rural landscape and sustain the family. Rather than simply being immobilized in the village, I argue that providing for the household requires continuous movements between the rural and the urban spheres, and that people in Bihar believe this movement reflects the tenuousness of their existence.

This relates to my second intervention—how these sensations of precarity are embodied and materialized in everyday practice. In Bihar, this materialization of precarity occurs most explicitly through food—the grinding labor and monotonous fare that people ate everyday. It points to sensations of satisfaction and pleasure, and their absence, in rural homes. But precarity is also concretized in other ways in Bihar: A lack of money restricts the ways that people secure their bodily well-being and comfort in terms of food, clothing, and household furnishing. Given their awareness of what they lack, rural people emphasize material objects as useful household items and status symbols. They creatively repurpose things – old newspapers, used vessels and containers, random pieces of wood – as a means of provisioning the households.

This leads me to my third intervention—how people respond to precarious circumstances and make their own world through an ethics of care. One objection to scholarly discourses on precarity is that they often become bleak or totalizing (cf. Waite 2009). Indeed the structural violence that people face was grave and hard to overcome. But in order to avoid disabling accounts of rural Bihar, I emphasize their agency – and their conception of their own agency – within these larger structures. Biharis herald their own creativity and spirit of resilience. What economic arrangements and affective ties do people forge to enable them to endure, or alter, their situation? I trace the intimacies of family life, and the ways that care is enacted and challenged in these spaces. And I examine their own ethos of resourcefulness as practical and embodied responses to the problems of daily life. Following enactments of care and resourcefulness disrupts narratives of scarcity in Bihari by emphasizing what forms of life were possible, rather than focusing on what they lacked.

Care

In response to the precarity of rural life in Bihar, I emphasize care practices in the family. Care emerged as an important analytic because it illuminates the diverse practices through which people respond to the vulnerabilities of rural life. Investigating care reveals the sedimented structures and enduring ties that provide people’s lives with order and meaning. At the same time, it shows how people creatively respond to the challenges they face. These practices became all the more pertinent given the pressures and uncertainties that mark their lives. While families are anxious about the future, I privilege care because it is the ideal that animates the lives of rural Biharis. It is the dominant logic that organized their days. In this sense, care is akin to other optics that anthropologists have deployed: culture, habitus, or webs of meaning. The difference is

that care foregrounds their own commitments toward each other. It expresses human agency in addition to structure, affective ties and embodied labor in addition to obligation.

In Bihar, people express care for each other through food, through money, through conversation and fellowship, through worry, through touch. Among these, food stands out as the site of considerable effort and anxiety. It is the material and the medium through which people understand how they matter to one another. Given this social landscape, I frame care primarily in terms of food practices—the daily work of farming, feeding, and commensal eating that sustains the family. Biharis direct care towards spouses, children, parents, kin, and neighbors. And providing for the family in rural Bihar also entails multiple forms of care directed toward non-human others: animals, crops, foods, land, and gods.

This ethnography dwells in the interstices of bureaucratic care (cf. Stevenson 2014), unpacking everyday experiences of care amidst state neglect. When I arrived in Bihar to study rural people's changing food practices, I expected to encounter state and NGO-led nutrition programs, or schemes to distribute foodgrains. In Bihar, however, the presence of the state figures most prominently as an absence, an entity unable to guarantee the well-being of most of its citizens (Gupta 2012; Vasavi 2012). I found that governmental programs, when they existed, were often dysfunctional; even when they worked well, they figured only peripherally in people's lives. Given these circumstances, I ask: What forms of care emerge in a place where the state has largely abdicated its responsibility? What does it mean to be well-fed, or to be well-cared for, against the backdrop of persistent rural precarity?

In answering these questions, I emphasize the temporality and embodied dimensions of care.³ This foregrounds care as a daily and long-term project in response to the precarity of life in

³ Anthropologists have mobilized the concept of care in multiple ways. Perhaps most prominently, medical anthropologists have examined care in a variety of settings: for the ill and disabled, through biomedicine and

rural Bihar. Care is not something that only appears at exceptional moments – at times of crisis or illness – but is part of an ongoing effort to sustain the household. The question of who counts, and what is owed to whom, are being asked and answered everyday at the level of the family. I consider how different members of the household negotiate this care over time. Care, I argue, is taking place on multiple timescales simultaneously (cf. Coe 2016). In Bihar, on the daily level, it was a question of what to prepare for dinner, and how to process crops. On a seasonal level, it was question of what to grow, and how to earn enough money for household expenses. On the generational level, it was about people’s connection to land and their home, about how to imagine for the family a future beyond agriculture. In looking at these layered and overlapping aims, I show how the different roles and responsibilities in the family have shifted over time.

By examining care as it is enacted and experienced in family life – that is, care that was shaped by but not a direct product of the market forces – I pivot away from the growing literature that frames care in terms of immaterial and affective labor. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe “the production and manipulation of affect” as one of the emergent forces driving the global economy (Hardt and Negri 2001, 293). This term has often been taken up in the literature about the commodification of care—in fields ranging from sex work to elder care (Ungerson 2005; Lamb 2009; Muehlebach 2011; Stacey 2011; Buch 2013; Koch 2014). With the increasing commodification of food and sex in South Asia (Liechty 2005), this is a trend deserving of attention. But against this focus on care mediated by market relationships, I underscore the ways that in rural Bihar care is first and foremost oriented toward the family. This sheds light on the

traditional healing, in institutional settings and homes (Cohen 1998; Mol 2008; Kleinman 2009; Garcia 2010; Buch 2013; Stevenson 2014). Environmental anthropologists have looked at disputes about conserving land and natural resources (Heatherington 2012; Choy 2011). Scholars of food systems have also pushed the optics of care in multispecies directions—to chickens, soil, and microbes, etc. (Paxon 2008; Donati 2014; Keck 2015; Puig de la Bellacasa 2015; Tsing 2015). Political anthropologists have traced state and non-state programs in response to humanitarian crises (Ticktin 2011; Fassin 2012). Anthropologists have also built on Michel Foucault attention to “care of the self” to consider the ways people cultivate themselves as ethical subjects (Foucault 1988; Ecks 2004; Farquhar 2005; Mahmood 2005; Pandian 2009).

ways that care emerges through embodied labor, material substances, and the distribution of resources within the household. Furthermore, instead of privileging the emotional or affective aspects of care practices, and thus instantiating a dualism between mind and body, I look at the way these exertions are somatized. This reflects the stresses of everyday life and the sheer physicality of toil in Bihar, from the drudgery of women's domestic work to men's exertions on farms and beyond.

Recently, anthropologists of food have deployed care as an optic, which is fitting given that food is a source of nourishment. Anna Lavis et al. point out that care assumes “a soft, virtuous form, associating it with commensality, affection, love, kinship and social cohesion” (Lavis et al. 2015, 4). Indeed Elizabeth Roberts observes that, for many families, “food is love” (Roberts 2015). Food is how people perform their obligations and affection, a sign of investment in their children's happiness and well-being. Anthropologists of kinship have long focused on feeding and eating practices and the centrality of food in family life (Meigs 1984; Weismantel 1988; Sobo 1994; Carstern 1997). But as Paul Stoller notes, food can also be used as a weapon, to disgust and divide as much as to please and unite (Stoller 1989). Indeed, Angela Garcia argues that care is not always gentle; it is sometimes forceful, or a source of conflict (Garcia 2010). Attending to the logics of care in Bihari families also points to neglect – whose interests can be ignored, which bodies can be put at risk – and the ways that violence is not separate from care but often mingled with it.

Despite all the theoretical work surrounding care, it remains a capacious concept, one that is not easy to define. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa describes the multiple registers of care—as “an affective state, a material vital doing, and an ethico-political obligation” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 90). She notes there is “a critical edge to care” that has made it an important concept for

feminist scholars (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011, 99). For those scholars (cf. Gilligan 1982), care is a means of critiquing global capitalism as well as regimes that devalued women's contributions. Certainly, in Bihar this orients much-needed attention toward the drudgery of women's labor. It also points to arduous and unremunerated agricultural labor that was often overlooked given the rising preference for salaried income.

In interrogating care in Bihar, I follow John Borneman's call for anthropological inquiry into "the actual situations in which people experience the need to care and be cared for and to the political economies of their distribution" (Borneman 1997, 583). Similarly, writing about care in India, Julia Kowalski stresses the need for looking at local articulations of care, especially when juxtaposed with transnational regimes (Kowalski 2016). Indeed, I found that within Bihari families care flows according to well-defined structures of power and meaning. At the same time, these hierarchies and structures are constantly in the process of being reproduced and transformed, often in relation to broader political and economic forces.

Biharis use a constellation of words to describe acts of care. I do not aim to identify a one-to-one translation for the concept of "care;" I do not believe that is possible, or desirable. Rather, I aim to unpack the diverse terminologies and meanings which, taken together, point to the attention and activities of people devoted to sustaining the family. Most generally, Biharis use the words *dhyān* (attention) and *dhekbhāl* (supervision). *Sevā* (service) primarily refers to acts of care for the elderly, the poor, or for cows or buffaloes (cf. Lamb 2000; Kowalski 2016). These words often appear with the verb *denā* (to give), underscoring the reciprocal nature of these relationships. With specific reference to children, parents use the causative verb forms *bacce khilānā* (feeding children) and *bacce parhānā* (teaching children). They often conjoin the words *pālan* (rearing, fostering) and *poṣaṇ* (nutrition, sustenance) to express nurture. The words

sāmbhālṅā (support) and *sahāyṅta* (aid) represent instances of material protection, maintenance, and assistance. Likewise, the words *cintā* (worry) and *tension* (adopting the English word) both reflect mental states of anxiety or unease about a situation or loved one. Men often speak of *duty* (adopting the English word) to describe their off-farm commitments that provided essential income for the family. In deploying these terms, they often contrast them with encounters with the market and the state, which they deemed perfunctory at best, and baldly neglectful at worst.

Social categories such as gender, caste, class, and age shape the forms that care assumes in Bihar. Although care in the family is differentiated along the lines of gender, I argue that care was not solely the province of women, or men. Instead men and women each put forth their own idiom and practices for expressing their sacrifices on behalf of the family—men through their exertions on farms and jobs beyond the village, and women through their domestic labor and supervision of children (cf. Trawick 1990; Visweswaran 1994; Donner 2008). Men express tensions about money and employment, and those tensions often flow through the household so that the women absorb them. This underscores the uneven division of labor, resources, and affect within the family. Yet there are also surprising moments that upended expected gender stereotypes. Just as Nefissa Naguib argues in Egypt, scholars have overlooked the way that men in India do assume childcare and household tasks (Naguib 2016). Likewise, A. R. Vasavi has underscored the growing feminization of agriculture in India in which women are increasingly engaged in the essential tasks of planting, weeding, harvesting, and threshing (Vasavi 2012). I found that in rural Bihar men and women, in different ways, both claim the responsibility of feeding the family.

Embodiment as Method

I investigated food practices in everyday life in rural Bihar through 16 months of research conducted from 2012 to 2014. My ethnographic fieldwork consisted of participant-observation in farming, cooking, and eating activities, conducted in Hindi and Magahi, the local language. I lived in one rural household, developing intimate relationships with that family and cultivating ties to the broader community. My wife Roanne also joined me in the village for five months to assist with my research. She too is proficient in Hindi, and she spent much of her time in spaces dominated by women. Through her efforts, I drew closer to the women in the family and gained fresh insights into their lives. Over the course of my time in Amalpur, I gradually came to understand the political economy and local food practices that characterized everyday life in Bihar.

But how might I write an ethnography that illuminated the sensations of precarity and forms of care that animated this world? I wrestled with this question early on in my fieldwork through earnest attempts to produce food diaries. Each day, I dutifully recorded that Ravi or Neelam ate *rotī* and *sabzī* for breakfast, then rice and *dāl* for lunch, followed by *rotī* and *sabzī* for dinner. In between, they drank tea and gave biscuits to the children. When available, they drank milk and ate fruit and sweets. I soon abandoned these diaries because it was obvious to me how little they said. There was nothing about satisfaction, frustration, or meaning in them. Entering that information onto the page seemed pointless. Instead, I found that dwelling with others and partaking in the daily bustle of family life was far more enlightening.

In this project, I attend to embodiment as a means of conjuring Biharis' experiences of precarity and their enactments of care. Focusing on the body provides a different form of evidence than food diaries and household budgets used in food security and poverty discourse.

The sensuous body – with all its appetites, pleasures, and vulnerabilities – sheds light on the intimate ways that people experience larger political economic formations. This sense of precarity provokes imbalances in strength and wellness that are inscribed on the body— imbalances that necessitate situated forms of care. Thinking about how people sustain the body thus pushes beyond concerns about calculation to consider the expectations, sensations, and desires that shape people’s lives.

Rural Biharis are discerning eaters. They have a well-developed sense of how food should taste, and how it should be grown, prepared, and eaten. This discernment is a large part of how they situated themselves as rural people. They have cultivated tastes for specific, locally grown foods. This pertains both to the grains they eat everyday – grown from particular kinds of seeds – and the specialty and seasonal foods that energize and enliven people’s days. Even as they struggle to provide for their families, they are still invested in the project of eating well. Indeed, their circumstances make that endeavor seem all the more important. They often frame their aspirations in terms of food and feeding. Their circumstances dictate periods of monotony and abstention, but also moments of pleasure and indulgence when they refused the logic of scarcity.

In the pages that follow, I explore the ways that Bihari food tastes and the way the Biharis themselves taste food. Thinking about these tastes and experiences of corporality points to the ways that rural Biharis have been historically constituted as embodied subjects. What are the histories of these eating habits? How did these forms of comportment come into being? Marcel Mauss writes of “techniques of the body,” highlighting the ways that body is man’s tool for experiencing the world and the way it is honed in each society (Mauss 1973). For Mauss, the body is a specific social and historical product. Drawing on Mauss, anthropologists have

attended to the ways that people's embodied practices emerge as a result of social formations such as colonialism and capitalism (Comaroff 1985; Ong 1988; Lock 1993; Farquhar 2002; Stewart 2007). Within South Asia, scholars have explored the specificities of the bodies produced at particular social and historical moments in the colonial and postcolonial eras (Daniel 1984; Arnold 1993; Alter 1994; Cohen 1998; Clark-Deces 2000; Axel 2001; Langford 2002; Desjarlais 2003; Green 2008; Copeman 2009).

I build on these approaches in considering how the bodies of rural Biharis have been constituted, with attention to the forms of difference that have emerged along lines of gender, age, and caste. Conceptions of what food and labor are necessary, legitimate, and ethical vary for different people in the village. These are durable but have also evolved over time. Tracing caste histories in Bihar reveals the iniquitous distribution of vulnerability and how subordinated groups have contested it. These histories of the body have implications for people's food practices, as eating habits and tastes are a product of politics.

The colonial era witnessed the solidification of caste as a category of governance and, subsequently, of identity politics (Dirks 2001). As Jeffrey Witsoe notes, in the late nineteenth century Bhumihars and other caste groups in Bihar formed caste associations (*sabhā*) in order to gain recognition from colonial officials and improve their status (Witsoe 2013, 30-33). These nascent caste-based political movements were formalized over the course of the twentieth century, eventually producing a split between landlords (*zamīndār*) and their tenants. Given the Bhumihars successes, caste like the Yadavs and Kurmis followed with their own organizations to press their claims (Witsoe 2013). These indigenous political movements for farmers created the conditions for the abolition of *zamīndārī* (the rule of landlords) after India's independence, in the early 1950s.

The final decades of the twentieth century witnessed growing lower-caste and Dalit assertiveness in opposition to the persistent power of upper-caste landholding elites (cf. Wadley 1994; Gidwani 2008; Pandian 2009; Rao 2009). Their political rise was a protest against a world where caste determined access to resources, and thus social class. In Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav came to power as a champion of the lower castes and an embodiment of their growing power (Witsoe 2011). More consequentially, still, the Mandal Commission was set up to empower socially and economically disadvantaged groups. It advocated reserving slots for government jobs and public universities for members of Other Backward Classes, in addition to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. When its recommendations were implemented in the 1990s, upper-caste students protested the changes in policy that would prevent their admission to colleges. Some committed suicide in the streets of Patna (cf. Dirks 2001). In Amalpur, the rhetoric and resentment against this policy has only hardened since that time. In other parts of India, this has accelerated demands for reservations by other caste groups—the Jats in Haryana, the Gujjars in Rajasthan, and the Patels in Gujarat.

Parallel to these political movements, Bihari society underwent significant social changes. There was a convergence in eating habits among caste groups. Many lower-caste groups adopted upper-caste eating habits, while still retaining some practices (e.g., meat-eating and drinking alcohol) that Vaishnava households shun. With the Green Revolution, all classes gained access to inexpensive grains (primarily, rice and wheat). With the rise of mechanization, rural people turned towards the city, which in turn brought a taste for new foods to the village. The last several decades have brought an increase in movement that has reordered expectations about rural life.

Despite a recent rise in prosperity, the current historical moment is characterized by deep unease about the future of agriculture. Upper-caste farmers have watched their political position and control over land erode over time. The continued intensification of Green Revolution technologies has boosted yields but dampened grain prices. At the same time, food inflation and the cost of living have risen. Despite these changes, people in Nalanda district continue to see the subsistence farming as a form of protection against the pressures of the market. The challenge they face is how to nourish the family and the body under these circumstances.

Sherri Ortner has observed that ethnography consists of an “attempt to understand another life world using the self—as much of it as possible—as the instrument of knowing” (Ortner 2006, 42). Writing about the anthropology of embodied experience, Julie Livingston argues for the possibility of moments of solidarity, even amidst suffering (Livingston 2009; Livingston 2013). Likewise, I sought to produce an ethnography of embodied experience attuned to both the shared connections and the disjunctures of a life shared with others—to the moments of collective pleasure and frustration, and to the differences between persons that emerged according to gender and class. Living in rural Bihar, I hoped to use my body to learn something that could not be uncovered in surveys or interviews—to grasp something of the place on an embodied level, even if I could not fully articulate it.

My body became implicated in my work in ways that I did not expect. During the months I lived in Bihar, my body went underwent noticeable changes. I lost weight—more than 30 lbs. I was transformed into a startlingly skinny person. This happened despite the best efforts of my hosts and myself to forestall it. My neighbors were filled with consternation, even embarrassment. They often remarked that with the influence of the food and sun, respectively, I had become thinner and darker. I was “looking Bihari,” they told me. It was their way of

expressing concern, of documenting the changes that I had undergone. But I winced at this formulation whenever someone said it.

I persisted in trying to apprehend their world. To the extent that my hosts permitted me to dabble in agricultural and household tasks – they objected that I was a guest, and in any case not very useful – I aimed to familiarize myself with the strains and risks to the body involved in rural labor. Although I knew I could not erase the advantages conferred on me a lifetime of upper-middle-class American nutrition, I wanted to learn what quality of sustenance one could gain from yet another plate of potatoes and bread.

In writing, as in research, the embodied nature of knowledge about life in Bihar presented an epistemological problem. Even as I dwelled in these places, and they dwelled in my body, I confronted the question: How to render these worlds in their thickness? How to express the multiplicity of the body and human experience? Indeed, there is something ineffable and uncertain in taking the body as an object of study. Bodies are open to interpretation. A person's somatic experiences are not easily shared, or read. I depart from the premise that people's actions and desires often resist easy summation into totalizing narratives. Yet scholarship about rural India often proceeds with encapsulations that tend towards tropes of tradition or structure, poverty or neoliberalism. This dissertation is an attempt to tell a story about life in rural Bihar through the body, and to complicate modes of economic storytelling that reduce bodily states to a single trend. It is an attempt to bring a world into being—partial, fragmented, and always in flux. In doing so, I focus on moments of moral ambivalence and uncertainty, incoherence and contradiction.

Setting the Scene

From Patna, the capital of Bihar, Amalpur lies several hours to the south, in the heart of Nalanda district. The single-lane road out of the city is normally clogged with traffic. All manner of vehicles ply the road into and out of the capital—trucks, buses, cars, auto-rickshaws, bicycles, handcarts. When the route is backed up, the trucks hauling goods to small towns around the state sit idle in a long line, stretching more than a kilometer in length, their engines turned off. When at last the bottleneck breaks, the road cuts through the broad plain south of the Ganga. Stately trees line the road, and fields of paddy extend into the distance. The land appears perfectly flat.

The road passes through rural bazaars filled all kinds of shops: grain depots, showrooms for farming equipment, cloth shops, sweets stalls, pharmacies. Small industrial workshops line the roadway. The streets are filled with men and women from nearby villages—walking, working, hauling. Commerce here requires physical exertion. Painted advertisements for cement, men's underwear, and mobile phone plans adorn brick walls that line the roadway. They hint at the sort of market that Bihar is imagined to be—a place to sell basic necessities, but where there is not enough purchasing power for much else.

Numerous roads lead from the highway to unseen villages, shrouded in the trees beyond. After two hours, passing through several small towns and bazaars, the highway arrives at a crossroads, a junction marked by a row of small shops and a school building. It looks like any other crossroads. A small road curves passed the school and the *maidān* (public grounds) to reach the village of Amalpur.

Amalpur is an unassuming farming village of approximately one thousand residents. It is a largely upper-caste village dominated by Bhumihars, with a small number of Brahmins mixed in. A small number of lower-caste Kahar households occupy one corner of the village. The

settlement is densely built up tangle of houses and trees, surrounded on all sides by wide expanses of fields. Neighboring villages, each dominated by a different caste – mostly lower-caste groups, such as Yadavs, Kurmis, Chouhans – lie approximately one kilometer apart in different directions.

Farmers grow multiple food crops primarily for domestic consumption, selling the excess in the market. They are able to grow much of their own food in two or three cropping seasons each year—paddy following the monsoon, followed by wheat, lentils, potatoes, and mustard in the winter and spring. They also grow a small amount of vegetables and fruits in kitchen gardens, but have not taken up large-scale vegetable cultivation on their farms. Most households keep one or two cows or buffaloes as a source of milk, and grow fodder for their animals as well. Households in this area sustain themselves through a combination of agricultural production and off-farm employment, with one or more men from the household migrating out of the village for some part of the year.

In the years prior to my fieldwork, the government had made long overdue upgrades to the local infrastructure. It repaved the road to the nearest town, reducing travel times and discomfort for the local people. Six or eight hours of electricity reach the village, an improvement over the many years when the village was entirely disconnected from the power grid. But many of the tube wells built to provide irrigation still lie defunct. Residents of the village have also upgraded their homes, so that houses of brick and concrete have replaced mud huts with thatched roofs.

The village of Govindpur lies one kilometer to the south of Amalpur. The residents of this village are primarily lower-caste Paswans, though there is a sizable contingent of Yadavs and a small number of people hailing from other lower castes. In contrast to Amalpur, the Dalit

residents of Govindpur are typically marginal landholders, and many are landless. As a result, they often work as sharecroppers or casual laborers. Many of the men leave the village for several months of the year, to work in Delhi, or Haryana, or Tamil Nadu. Their homes are smaller, and are more likely made of mud brick with thatched roofs, or unplastered brick. People there tend to live in nuclear family households rather than the joint family households that are more common in Amalpur. In addition to keeping cows and buffaloes, some people raise goats for sale in the market.

In one sense, Amalpur and Govindpur are separate villages inhabited by different castes. They did not mingle socially. But, as one landowner in Amalpur put it, “The people of these two villages are bound together through agriculture.” Historically, the residents of Amalpur employed the residents of Govindpur as their bonded laborers and tenants. Through decades of land reform, mechanization, and out-migration, this relationship has endured. People in Amalpur continue to hire people from Govindpur as sharecroppers and day laborers. The connection between individuals working together was sometimes warm and sometimes fraught. But given their interdependence, I cannot tell the story of the farming families of Amalpur without reference to Govindpur.

I found my way to Amalpur through a series of convoluted events. Rakesh’s family offered to host me in the village. I took my meals in his home. For the first stretch of fieldwork, lasting ten months, I lived in a one-room concrete house nearby that belonged to the family of his uncle, Dinesh Kumar. They provided a bed for me, and I purchased the other furniture and household supplies I needed from the market. I benefited from my connection to both families, as well as to their kin and neighbors whose homes were located next to mine. When I returned to

the village the following year after a short absence, I moved into a room in Rakesh's house. I resided there for a few more months, until my fieldwork was complete.

Dissertation Outline

This dissertation is divided into three parts, comprised of two chapters each. Each part and each chapter considers the interplay between rural Biharis' sensations of precarity and their care practices. How do people experience and respond to the uncertainty that marks everyday life? To answer this question, each chapter turns to the body, eliciting what people's bodily desires and exertions reveal about the ways people inhabit the current political moment. Bodies that are differently positioned in the rural world, by caste and gender, show the different opportunities and obstacles for sustaining the family.

Part one, "Rural Vulnerability," describes the unstable social and economic terrain of rural Bihar. It unpacks the particular challenges that Biharis face in terms of both agriculture and off-farm employment. It also highlights Bihari farmers' struggles to provide a viable future for their children. In their attempts to find a measure of security and sustenance, I trace the ways that Biharis have cultivated their tastes and practical knowledge of the local surroundings as a means of navigating these difficulties. Chapter 2, "Growing Ambivalence: Pressure, Pleasure, and Agrarian Futures in Bihar," examines the accelerated capitalization of rural life in Bihar, with attention to changes in the means of agricultural production: land, seed, and labor. I observe that small-scale farmers' experiences of uncertainty prompt them to prepare their families for a future beyond agriculture. Given these shifts in the rural political economy, I argue that these trends destabilize the meaning of the category of "farmer" itself. Chapter 3, "Tenuous Livelihoods, Temporary Schemes: Articulations of Precarity and Resourcefulness," explores how Biharis

draw on the idiom of tenuousness (*asthāyī*) to describe sensations of precarity and contingency. At the same time, I trace an ethos of resourcefulness in utilizing locally available materials as a response in diverse areas of economic life, including off-farm employment in the private sector, irrigation techniques, and house construction. I contrast these modes of survival with the celebratory discourses about *jugaad* innovations in urban India.

Part two, “Gendered Food Practices,” shows how Biharis enact an ethics of care through their food practices within the family. I focus on gendered eating practices because gender is perhaps the primary category shaping life in rural India. In particular, I trace the way that broader economic pressures filter down to individual lives, and how this sense of vulnerability impacts relationships in the household. At the same time, I highlight countervailing moments of care that bind people together as a family amidst their daily struggles. Chapter 4, “Intimate Rivals: Women’s Labor in the Joint Family Household,” tracks the interactions among the women of a single joint family household over several months. In particular, I emphasize the distribution of labor and resources based on role in the household, and how these dynamics have shifted as a result of external economic pressures. These interpersonal relationships shed light on how each woman constructs her own notion of the ethics of care. Chapter 5, “Masculine Appetites: Alcohol, Meat, and the Figure of the Badmash,” demonstrates how men enact different notions of an ethics of masculinity through their food practices and movements through the rural sphere. In particular, eating meat and drinking alcohol are the focus of discourses on respectability that varied based on caste and class. While noting the power of these claims, I underscore the moral ambiguity of these practices in everyday life.

Part three, “Belonging and Aspiration” examines the kinship ties and ritual practices that sustain Biharis as they face uncertainty about the future. I attend to the ways that economic

pressures shape people's employment opportunities and social connections within in the village. Given the necessity of forging a future beyond agriculture, I show the ways that people develop, enact, and legitimate their plans. I demonstrate that enacting care requires deciding who is part of the family. Chapter 6, "Refusing Scarcity: Affiliation and Abundance in a Regional Festival," considers how Chhath Puja, a popular Bihari festival, fosters a sense of regional belonging and ties to the extended family. During the festival, devotees gathered with neighbors and kin to prepare and share regional and seasonal foods. I argue that rural Biharis valued Chhath because it offers an opportunity to enact forms of care that refuse the logic of scarcity that structured everyday life. Chapter 7, "Building Beyond the Bypass Road: Urbanization, Ritual Eating, and the Fate of the Joint Family in Patna," relates the story of a single joint family household that attempted to establish a foothold for themselves in urban India. I argue that the food practices in the Hindu house consecration ritual reflected a desire to cultivate a middle-class, modern identity, while still sustaining their rural roots. Instead of framing rural and urban as distinct spheres – the former associated with dysfunction and tradition and the latter with progress and modernity – I emphasize urbanization as constituted by the regular and ongoing traffic of bodies, material, and capital between these areas.

Chapter 2

Growing Ambivalence: Pressure, Pleasure, and Agrarian Futures in Bihar

One evening, I witnessed an incident that elucidated for me the stakes of my research. It was an ordinary evening. I was sitting in the courtyard of Rakesh's house, about to eat dinner. The members of the household were immersed in their usual rhythms—the women busily preparing dinner, the men socializing in the lane with their neighbors, the children completing their homework on the bench under one of the few light bulbs in the house.

Rajesh Kumar, Rakesh's younger brother, came into the house. Rajesh did not reside in Amalpur most of the year, but worked in Delhi as an engineer. He rented a small apartment there, and lived there with his wife and daughter. But he had returned to the village for a few weeks for a visit.

As soon as Rajesh came in, he immediately saw that Rishu, his nephew, and Rakesh's eight year-old son, was misbehaving. He was not studying properly, but was fooling around with his sister, Anjali. At once, Rajesh grabbed Rishu's arm and gave him a few solid slaps on his thin, writhing back. Then he tweaked his ear and, holding it, shouted at him with disgust.

“What do you think will happen if you don't study? Do you want to grow up to become a farmer (*kisān*)? Do you?”

Rajesh had given Rishu just a few perfunctory slaps. Yet it filled this slight, sensitive boy with fright. He howled as he endured his punishment. As soon as he could slip free from his uncle's grasp, Rishu ran off, still moaning, to cower in the safety of his grandmother's embrace.

Initially, I wondered if the fact that Rajesh disciplined Rishu would cause tensions. After all, he was not in the village throughout the year, and had become a city-dweller. But this was

not the case. Rakesh and the rest of the family, they made it clear, wholly approved of Rajesh's actions. Lately, and much to the chagrin of the entire household, Rishu had begun to entirely skip both school and his daily after-school tuition lessons. When Rakesh approached the instructor to inquire why the man was forsaking his duty to provide homework for his pupil, Rakesh was embarrassed to learn that his son had not been turning up for class at all.

For the discipline of children in Amalpur, this scene was not out of the ordinary, in either its manner or its cause. So while I was not surprised by the slaps, Rajesh's admonition – "Do you want to grow up to become a farmer?" – and the disgust with which he spat those words, shocked me. Why were people who depended on the land for their security and their livelihood so intent that their children not follow in their footsteps?

In Amalpur, farming was the primary occupation for most of the households. Moreover, cultivating the land was also the source of their identity as resourceful rural people, and fostered a sense of community belonging in the village. The family belonged to the Bhumihar caste, whose name means cultivators of the land (*bhūmi*) and were traditional landowners in the area. Like many in the village, they spoke with great affection for their village and their way of life. They drew pride and pleasure from eating what they have grown themselves, casting aspersions on the poor quality and unknown origins of foods available in the city. Many times, they offered me a piece of fruit or handful of produce freshly plucked from the farm. Whenever a family member went off to the city for work or study, they set off with as large a sack of rice or lentil as they could manage.

Such a trend was not unique to this Bhumihar family, or to Bihar alone. The family's position recalls Patricia and Roger Jeffrey's *Don't Marry Me to a Plowman!* The book's titular lament sums up the attitude of many rural people hoping to escape a life of toil. Similarly, Anand

Pandian has observed that even as they embraced their earthy identity lower-caste Kallar cultivators in Tamil Nadu believed raising their children to become farmers and nothing more would be to fail them (Pandian 2009, 221-222). This signals a shift for a country in which the farmer was once hailed as a figure of respectability and the backbone of the nation. How had they arrived at this point, where the prospect of one's child becoming a farmer signals such an undesirable, even shameful, future? How had the words *kisān* (farmer) and *khetī* (farming) shifted from marks of propriety, and come to be considered curses?

The answer to this question lies in the ways that small-scale farmers in Bihar confront the accelerated capitalization of rural life. With this phrase, I underscore the ways that people are increasingly subjected to markets over the course of their lifetimes. Rural Bihari has long been embedded in capitalist markets for centuries (Yang 1998). But the contemporary moment is marked by the increasing commodification of the means of agricultural production, such as land, seeds, inputs like fertilizers and fuel, and labor. Agricultural supply companies have become embedded at many stages of the production process. As a result of this cash-nexus (cf. Thompson 1971), rural people have increasingly turned to off-farm labor market in order to meet the rising household expenses. These include regular purchases of schoolbooks, packaged foods, consumer goods, and saving for expensive dowries for daughters. This emphasis on salaried employment and urban opportunities has in turn reshaped people's food practices in terms of what farmers produced and consumed, and how they organized their labor within the household, and their aspirations for the future.

This accelerated capitalization of rural life was not simply coterminous with the period of economic liberalization that picked up steam in the 1990s (cf. Corbridge and Harriss 2000; Sunder Rajan 2006; Sharma 2008; Lerche 2013). It is not that state support for agriculture has

fallen away, though there were huge gaps in the local infrastructure. In fact, in order to secure votes from rural voters who comprise the majority of the state's population, the Bihar state government has instituted many programs and subsidies designed to shield farmers from market forces. Collectively, these represent a Polanyian “double movement” in response to market forces (Polanyi 1957). Rather, the rising importance of capital in rural Bihar was both a cause and a result of rising land prices, the introduction of new seeds and cropping technologies, and changes in the labor market—trends that were concomitant with neoliberalism but not necessarily a direct result of it.

Much of the anthropology of agrarian issues in India has dealt with rural people's struggles as they are incorporated into commodity markets (Finnis 2007; Stone 2007; Ramamurthy 2011; Vasavi 2012; Lerche 2013; Münster 2015). As India globalizes, the “India Shining” narrative still persists, especially with optimism about the uptake of agricultural technologies (cf. Stone 2011). In contrast, A. R. Vasavi has convincingly argued that rural India represents a “shadow space”—a space of neglect, exploitation, and desperation (Vasavi 2012). Yet agriculture in Amalpur refuses to fit neatly into either of these two narratives. Nor are farmers there producing for global commodity changes. The experiences of small-scale farmers growing food primarily for their own subsistence have been largely overlooked. Against stories of ruin and celebration, I narrate another more nuanced story about how people struggle with the paradoxes of rural life. Agriculture in this area of Bihar worked well enough to provision the household, but entailed much toil and uncertainty. Even at moments of relative prosperity, rural people remained anxious about their future.

Scholars like Akhil Gupta and Vinay Gidwani have emphasized, respectively, themes like “hybridities” and the “interruptedness” of agriculture in India (Gupta 1998; Gidwani 2008).

Drawing on that work, I argue that agriculture in Bihar is marked by a series of contradictions: increases in yield, but stressed household budgets; full storerooms, but unsatisfied stomachs. Agriculture is at once essential and insufficient for sustaining the family. Rural people express both an affinity for their way of life and doubts about its future viability. Many strive to establish a foothold in urban India, but nevertheless rely on agriculture for their subsistence. Farmers refer to themselves as unemployed, and at the same time complain about a lack of laborers to work the land. They do not always understand these contradictions as such, but they inhabit them nonetheless. They are layered, entangled, creating a sense of inescapable pressure for small-scale farmers. Based on these paradoxes, I argue for a conceptual language for describing rural India that foregrounds ambivalence, vulnerability, and incompleteness.

Precarity, of course, has long been a hallmark of agriculture in Bihar, as well as India more generally. Agriculture everywhere is always susceptible to poor weather, pests, the vagaries of markets, and shortfalls in infrastructure. Farmers express unease about the viability of agriculture. Furthermore, each generation perhaps feels that they face a defining crisis or monumental transition. So there's a pitfall in over-emphasizing the novelty of a given moment. But my emphasis on vulnerability derives from Biharis' own perception of a world that was changing, and one in which they were ill-positioned to thrive. Whereas earlier generations of Bihari farmers expected to depend on what they grew themselves to support the family, providing for one's family now requires now off-farm income.

In light of this vulnerability, I reveal how rural families have configured their household labor, farming, and eating practices (cf. Baviskar 2012). Farmers in Amalpur deem neither a purely urban nor a purely rural existence adequate. They are not "post-agrarian," as John Harriss et al. has termed it, but they are preparing themselves for a future beyond agriculture (Harriss et

al. 2012). Given this state of affairs, farmers emphasize their children's formal education as the proper site of investment, while they continued to cultivate the land. Both the urban and the rural figured in the future, but different members of the household are associated with different spheres of life. These changes are unfolding over generations. As Dhan Raj, a genial, proud farmer in Amalpur, put it, "It's my job to put the money in the ATM. It's my son's job to take the money out of the ATM." His son was studying engineering in a far-off city. He had aspirations to a good job in industry. Amalpur constituted the center of Dhan Raj's social and economic world, but events elsewhere would define his son's life.

Yet farmers' sense of vulnerability cannot be apprehended through economic calculus alone (cf. Nawn 2016). Simply to point out that they hedged by growing both subsistence foods and commodity crops, or depended on both agriculture and off-farm income obscures the gathering sense of pressure and unease that marked their daily lives. To the extensive literature on the instability of agriculture in South Asia, I add a phenomenological perspective on how families grappled with the realities they faced. How does rural precarity get embodied? What does wholesome food taste like? What forms of labor and care are necessary to sustain the family? Attending to these sensations of wellness, pleasure, and unease illuminates the ways that rural people derived a sense of control from the land, and also perceived emergent threats to their security.

In the remainder of this chapter, I investigate the primary means of agricultural production: land, seed, and labor. For each of these three material inputs, I historicize the changes underway, and underscore the ways that each of these aspects has been commodified. Given these conditions, I show how people struggle with and inhabit the contradictions of rural life in Bihar. I argue, that the insecurity of agriculture threatened not only rural people's

livelihoods but also their identity as farmers. Taken together, these changes call into question the accuracy and utility of the term “farmer” itself, both as an ascriptive identity category and as a category of analysis for scholars. These developments in turn reflect the ambivalence and uncertainty that mark the daily lives of rural Biharis.

Land: Patterns of Ownership

According to oral histories conducted with older men from Amalpur, the village was settled approximately 500 years ago. Bhumihars fled east from Uttar Pradesh, perhaps to escape the orbit of Mughal rule. They cleared the jungle and founded the village, becoming landholders in the area. With the arrival of the British in India, the question of land ownership in Bihar was organized through the Permanent Settlement (Guha 1963; Jha 1980). The British Raj empowered local landlords (*zamīndār*) to collect revenues. This solidified the creation of two rural classes: landlords and those who worked the land (their tenants and bonded laborers). Throughout much of this part of Bihar, the main landlords were Bhumihars. After India’s independence, the mobilization of farmers through the *kisān* movement resulted in the abolition of *zamīndārī* (the rule of landlords) in Bihar in 1951. Yet despite efforts to redistribute land, landholdings in this area remain concentrated in the hands of dominant upper-caste households.

John Harriss argues that despite recent claims about the shifting caste hierarchies, landlordism remains an enduring organizing principle of rural life (Harriss 2013). Even with changes in earning power and access to education, rural elites have managed to maintain a hold on power. In this part of Bihar, Bhumihars still maintained larger than average landholdings. Yet they took little comfort in this. What they felt instead was a sense of pressure about access to land. They projected onto the present their anxiety about a future in which they no longer have

enough land. Rather than a sudden shift in land tenure, or a violent upheaval caused by “regimes of dispossession” (Levien 2015), Bhumihar landowners in Amalpur were in the midst of a gradual dispossession that was playing out over the course of several generations.

Land, once plentiful for Bhumihar farmers, has become increasingly scarce. There was no cheap land for sale, no more jungle to clear. People in Amalpur attributed this change to population growth in the village. As households grow in size, they often underwent a process of subdivision, wherein multiple male heirs inherited equal parcels. This process of repeated fission made it challenging for farmers to support their families. The subdivisions of land meant that farmers held non-contiguous plots throughout the village. With fields in half a dozen or so locations, it was more time-consuming to arrange the plowing, irrigation, and harvesting of these crops.

These changes have unfolded over the past several decades. For instance, Rakesh’s grandfather once owned 26 *bīghās* of land. The *bīghā* is a local unit of measurement of land, roughly equivalent to 0.4 hectares. Each *bīghā* is made of 20 *khattā*. At the time of Rakesh’s grandfather’s death, the landholding was split in five equal parts, a share given to each of his five heirs. Thus Rakesh and his brothers, farming as a joint family household, possessed five *bīghās*. That was more than a sufficient amount to sustain a household of eight or ten people.

But when it comes time to further divide their land, Rakesh would be able to leave only one *bīghā* to Rishu. That was as little as some of the poorest households in the village possessed. Although yields have increased, and may continue to do so with further technological developments, the residents of Amalpur doubted that improved yields or prices for staple crops could ever make up the difference. As it becomes harder to sustain a household through agriculture, families focused on employment opportunities beyond the village. Although they did

not wish for their children to become farmers, they also believed that land provided the best security against spiking food prices and the vagaries of the labor market.

But this demographic pressure prompted by the soaring population of Bihar over the past few decades has also transformed the value of land. Farmers frequently spoke with awe about how the price agricultural land in the village had risen many-fold over the course of their lifetimes. The skyrocketing price of agricultural land has been a well-documented phenomenon in India. Sanjoy Chakravorty, for instance, has tracked the consequences of this steep rise in price for land acquisition. He focuses his analysis on high-profile national conflicts, such as the expansion of cities into rural areas, the establishment of Special Economic Zones, and the encroachment of corporate interests. Yet contests about the value and uses of land are recurring on a small scale each day in rural India. Given the high level of fragmentation in Bihar – Chakravorty notes that Bihar has one of the highest percentage of small-scale farmers – it is also important to consider how conflicts over land play out among small-scale farmers in remote rural districts (Chakravorty 2013, 34-35, 182). How do farmers in these places navigate these dynamics about acquiring and utilizing land?

The high price of agricultural land constrained farmers' sense of their own ability to shape their world. Rakesh considered the math. "The price of land depends on its condition. Today it can cost roughly one lakh (100,000) rupees (US \$1666.67) to purchase one *bīghā* (0.4 hectares) of land." This was an enormous sum for most families in Amalpur, most of whom earned approximately Rs. 5,000 (US \$83.33) a month.

"How long would it take to realize a return on that investment?" I asked.

"The revenue from one *bīghā* of land might be five or ten thousand rupees (US \$83.33-\$166.67) for a season. So it takes an entire lifetime (*zindagī-bhar*) to see a profit. So it's really

just an investment for one's children (*bāl-bacce*).”

Given land scarcity, the competition whenever it did become available had become intense. One evening, my neighbor Rati Kant Upadhyay stormed into my room. He was a mild-mannered man, almost retiring in nature. I had never seen him so agitated. He seethed for a moment before he calmed down enough to share what happened. His family had been leasing a parcel of five *khattā* (0.1 hectares) from a farmer in a neighboring village. When that man decided in fact to sell the land, Rati assumed that as the current cultivator he would have the first chance to purchase it. But as word of the proposed sale spread throughout the village, another man from Amalpur had swooped in to offer more. When Rati became aware of this maneuver, he was furious. He regarded it as a betrayal by a fellow member of his village.

“The system is wrong. It shouldn't be like this,” he kept repeating, still shaking. “Just like that he interfered in our negotiations! He's truly a man without morals (*khatam ādmī*)!”

In the end, Rati's family secured the land, but only after paying Rs. 5,000 (US \$83.33) as a premium. They had no choice. For days his anger smoldered.

The situation was even bleaker for lower-caste residents of the surrounding villages. Their ancestors often served as tenants or bonded laborers for the landlords in Amalpur. Some of their fathers or grandfathers had gained control of small parcels of land in the years after independence. The mechanisms of this process remained obscure to me: Lower-caste farmers claimed that their grandfathers or fathers purchased the land, but they did not know the specifics. Farmers from Amalpur, on the other hand, claimed their ancestors had donated the land (*bhū-dān*). It is possible that this was part of Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan Movement, encouraging wealthy landowners to donate land to the landless. They might also have been compelled to sell land because of land reform legislation that placed a ceiling on the amount of land one could

own. There was no record or memory of these transactions. Typically, lower-caste farmers held just a few *bīghās* of land, and sometimes only a few *khattā*. This provided them with a small amount of security—the ability to grow enough grain, lentils, and vegetables to provision the household, and little else. But the window during which they might establish a more sizable holding in the village seemed to have closed long ago.

Given the high stakes, conflicts over land were commonplace in Amalpur. Disputes about landownership were rife, particularly at the time when land was divided between heirs. There were multiple maps of the agricultural land, but they sometimes conflicted, and were written in Kaithi, a medieval bureaucratic script that few people in the village could read. Likewise, the government land records were just as riddled with errors, with many people possessing official documents claiming ownership. In case where the parties could not resolve the matter, court cases ran on for years. This tied up productive land, as nothing could be grown on disputed property.

The question of land in Amalpur thus presents a paradox: On the one hand, rural households felt a strong need for liquidity in order to continue to provision the household. They constantly complained that agriculture is not remunerative and that they do not often turn a profit, given the high cost of agricultural inputs. Furthermore, they emphasize the importance of prompting their children to find employment in the cities.

At the same time, farmers in Amalpur were eager to invest any surplus capital in land. For rural people with tenuous connections to the formal economy and a distrust of state institutions, land remained one of the most secure forms of investment. But with the price of farmland reaching all-time highs, it was difficult for farmers to increase their landholdings. This was partly due to cost. But it was also a challenge because existing owners were reluctant to sell

lest they miss out on even greater gains in the future. Typically, farmers only sold land as a last resort, to meet an otherwise a pressing debt or to pay for a daughter's dowry.

As a result, the market for land was exceptionally tight. Every rumor of available land sparked a buying frenzy. As one neighbor explained to me, "India's population is increasing. Yet the amount of land is fixed. So can the price ever fall? No, of course it can't!" They understood these changes as a product of the demographics of Bihar, and thus unlikely to be reversed.

Some residents of Amalpur sought to solve this paradox by investing in land beyond the village. Those who were able to amass some capital increasingly looked to cities as the ideal site for investment in land. Doing so would afford the family access to urban resources, like schools and jobs. But to purchase land and then construct a house on it was expensive, and some people ran out of money before the work was completed. Urban investments also brought other risks, such as the possibility of being cheated by a broker. There were also stories of people who thought they had purchased land from the rightful owner, only to find out that they had been deceived.

My neighbors related to me the story of one savvy individual who had the foresight to purchase land on the outskirts of a growing city many years ago. While others in the village were expanding their agricultural landholdings, he purchased an empty parcel of land on the outskirts of Rajgir, a major tourist destination in the district about one hour away. As the town blossomed into a city, he watched his land soar in value.

Seed: Hybrid Crops, Soil Fertility, and the Taste of Matured Rice

In Nalanda district, paddy (*dhān*) is the main *kharīf* (monsoon) crop planted with the onset of the rainy season in June. From June until November, paddy stretches to the horizon—

filling the available space between villages, roads, and trees with an uninterrupted sea of green, and later gold and brown. Almost all households in the village consume rice (*cāval*) on a daily basis. But despite this landscape of plenitude, memories of past agricultural shortages and periods of insecurity loom in the collective memory of Bihar.

“Our entire crop was absolutely *zero!*” Harendra Prasad exclaimed. “There was no rice harvest that year. There was no wheat harvest that year.” I was sitting on his porch on a warm October evening. These were his recollections of the Bihar famine of 1966-7, and the hardships that it caused in the area. There was always the threat of failed rains. I myself witnessed it during my second year in the village, when the farmers planted very little paddy. Based on these past experiences of scarcity and the current precarious state of the rural economy, farmers deeply valued land as means of providing security for the household.

No year since was so totally devastating as that famine year. According to Harendra, the only thing that prevented mass starvation was people’s practice of keeping one or two year’s supply of grain in their storerooms. “No one died here. Everyone had land in those days.” Meanwhile, the “working class (*mazdūr class*),” as Harendra put it, referring to the landless laborers and tenant farmers in the surrounding villages, depended on the distribution of food aid from the United States government. (cf. Ramalingaswami et al. 1971; Brass 1986; Dyson and Maharatna 1992; Doel and Harper 2006).

Prior to the famine, the region was dependent on rain-fed agriculture and the failed monsoon was very costly. “Before 1967, there was no tube well. No mechanism to extract water from the ground. Farmers were totally dependent on rainwater, or what was available in the stream (*nālā*). We had wells (*kaccā kuā*) that could draw water from seven or eight feet down. But during the drought (*akāl*), no water was available.” The Mohane River snakes through the

countryside, languidly flowing past the village, feeding the smaller streams and channels that bounded their fields.

“After that,” Harendra continued, “the Green Revolution started in this area the very next year. Dependence on rainwater alone lessened. We could take water from the ground with borewells and extracting machines. After that, there was never a total crop failure. We could get 20-40% yield by using groundwater irrigation.” Green Revolution agricultural practices were first introduced in India in the mid-1960s, with the aim of increasing production and preventing widespread famine. Farmers in Amalpur recalled the 1990s as the decade when these Green Revolution practices – hybrid seeds, chemical fertilizers, mechanized plowing – were widely adopted in this area. As the state’s administrative apparatus and infrastructure have improved, they cast off local seeds and traditional methods in favor of “*modern*” agronomic practices (cf. Stone 2007; Stone 2011). But this shift also necessitated the use of costly inputs, such as seeds, fertilizers, and diesel.

As land has become more precious, farmers have placed more emphasis on yield. They welcomed the widespread availability of high-yielding and more resilient hybrid seeds. Farmers in Amalpur described yield as the most important attribute, as the increases in production provided cash-strapped farmers with a boost. They learned of the new varieties via word-of-mouth and the advertising posters that seed companies pasted on the walls in the surrounding towns. Since adopting hybrid seeds in the 1990s, grain yields have doubled and in some cases even tripled. In addition, hybrid varieties require less water, and thus save farmers money by reducing diesel costs during irrigation. They can also better withstand periods of drought.

Despite these advances, people widely agreed that the grains of their youths were tastier and more fortifying for the body, even if the overall yields were lower (cf. Gold 2009). What

they gained in yield, they sacrificed in taste. In response, farmers planted multiple varieties of paddy each year—both hybrid seeds and what they called “*research*” (using the English word for improved seeds sold by private companies) or “*deśī*” (native) varieties. According to Gopal Prasad, although their yield was lower than hybrids, the *deśī* seeds are “beautiful (*khūbsūrat*)—to look, to taste, and to digest (*dekhne me, khāne me, pachne me*).” His household reserved a small portion of its land for these varieties, which they sometimes cultivated on their own, without sharecroppers. They sold the hybrid rice to a businessman and kept the *deśī* varieties for household consumption.

This reflects the ways that rural people prioritized the taste of food (cf. Trubek 2008; Gold 2009; Besky 2013). Even people who no longer resided in the village went to great lengths to eat grains from there. For instance, there was a man who worked as a teacher in Arunchal Pradesh. His stately, three-story house in Amaplur sat locked and vacant for most of the year. Once or twice a year, he visited to organize farming. His sharecroppers did all the labor and divided the crop. Then, rather than sell the rice locally, he shipped it via railroad to his residence in Arunchal Pradesh. Despite the expense, he trusted the quality of the rice grown on his own land more than that purchased in a market.

Prem Saran Upadhyay, an enterprising and energetic farmer from Amalpur, had a similar story. Once the lentil crop was harvested, he prepared a sack – several months’ worth – to send to his son who lived with his family in Ranchi, the capital of neighboring Jharkhand state. Prem Saran took the bundle to the bus depot in Biharsharif, and loaded it onto the roof of a Ranchi-bound bus. He paid the conductor a small fee for this. Prem Saran called his son with the expected arrival time and number of the bus. His son would go to the Ranchi bus depot at that time and collect the bundle. These were people who had never purchased rice, wheat, and lentils

in their entire lives. Even as they departed the area in search of work, they devised a means to keep the taste of home with them. This reflects the ways that the taste and aesthetics of food shapes Biharis' economic decisions and their broader engagement with the world.

As Alakh Deo Sharma, a respected older farmer in the village, noted, "This is a very fertile (*upajāū*) area. We get good crop growth here." The broad Gangetic plain was famed for its good soils and favorable growing climate. There was no part of their lands that suffered from poor soils or growing conditions. But despite the suitability of the land for agriculture and recent technical advances, they remembered the past as a time that was more favorable.

"It used to be even better. Now due to chemical fertilizers, the strength (*śakti*) of the land has diminished. It isn't as fertile as before. In the past, there was no need to apply chemical fertilizers. These days, without applying the chemical fertilizers, nothing will grow." This echoes Akhil Gupta's description of the adoption of Green Revolution practices in Uttar Pradesh in the 1990s. Farmers complained that the land had lost its vitality as a result of applying synthetic fertilizers (Gupta 1998).

"From the perspective of yield (*utpād*)," Alakh Deo Sharma continued, "chemical fertilizers increase growth. When people kept their bullocks and buffalo [to work in the fields], then the animals' dung (*gobar*) fertilized the fields. These chemicals were not necessary at that time. Now tractors have replaced the animals, and there is not enough animal fertilizer available."

There were no long any households in Amalpur that kept bullocks, though they could still be hired to plow the land. Most households in the village kept one or two cows or buffaloes to provide milk. They saved the dung from these animals, and used it as cooking fuel.

"What if people converted to using the gas as a cooking fuel, and applied the *gobar* from

the cows and buffaloes to their fields?” I asked.

He waved me off. “There’s an insufficiency (*abhāv*).” It would never, he insisted, be equal to the amount needed. When plowing with draft animals, the bullocks fertilized the land as they plowed. Nothing could be more efficient. But the practice had been largely abandoned in pursuit of other efficiencies. I had seen that plowing with draft animals was a laborious and time-consuming endeavor. Even more prohibitive, however, was the cost of keeping bullocks year-round when they were needed only for two brief stretches each year.

Alakh Deo Sharma had painted a portrait of a land that was still productive, but no longer had the vitality it once did. Farmers did not believe the land was dying, even when they were hit by drought, but maintaining a high level of production was a concern. These days, crops required multiple applications of fertilizers and pesticides (*ilāj*, literally medicine) to reach the desired level of production. Farmers also observed that they needed to apply greater amounts of fertilizer each year. This costly input cut into their profits, and its purchase was only occasionally reimbursed by the state.

In November, farmers turn their attention to the *rabī* (winter) crops. This is a busy period, as farmers rush to complete the paddy harvest and plant the winter crops. Wheat (*gehūn*) is the main staple crop. Many families in Amalpur eat *rotī* made of wheat twice a day, while poorer families eat a *rotī* meal once a day. In addition to wheat, mustard (*sarson*) is the main oilseed grown in the winter season. Rural Biharis tend to prefer mustard oil for cooking, and farmers sell the excess as a cash crop. It fetches a strong return, but is risky because the crop could be threatened by untimely rains. In addition, farmers grow several varieties of pulses – red split lentil (*masūr dāl*) chickpeas (*canā, grām, or bhut*), and pigeon peas (*tūr dāl* or *rahar dāl*) were the main ones – and vegetables such as potatoes, peas, and carrots.

One late afternoon in February, just after returning home from his job in Biharsharif, Gopal and his father Dinesh set off on a walk to check on the condition of their wheat crop. Gopal took a moment only to park his motorcycle, wash his hands and take a gulp of water from the hand pump, and change into his village clothes. For lounging in the village or walking in the fields, Gopal favored an undershirt and track pants. Dinesh, meanwhile, wore the more traditional *kurtā* and *lungī* (sarong). That afternoon, Gopal did not dally at home for long, as they were eager to make use of the last of the day's light.

I accompanied them on the road south of the village. We walked to the west for a short while before plunging into the broad field of wheat. The three of us walked in a single-file line on the narrow earthen embankments (*bāndh*) that separated one plot from the next. The stalks of wheat, now in their second month, swished at our legs. It was itchy, and I knew I would need to wash my arms and legs when I returned to the house. Walking through a field of growing crops is a slow process, almost like wading through water. Compared with the village, where the brick structures trapped in the heat and smoke, out in the fields the air was cooler, with a gentle breeze blowing. The broad, flat field was comprised of dozens of small plots, belonging to different households from the village. Most of the plots contained wheat, with some of mustard and pulses mixed in as well. Some farmers had planted a colorful border of mustard (*rāī*) around the edge of their plots in order to protect the wheat from being disturbed.

After several minutes, we arrived at the far end of the field. They paused at the edge of their plot, assessing it quietly for a moment. Dinesh bent down and fingered a few of the stalks of wheat. During the paddy harvest, months earlier, the soil had been soaked by untimely rains and reduced the paddy yield. But they did not judge that event to have adversely affected the wheat crop. They were satisfied with its growth, and reckoned it would be another month or so until it

was ready to harvest. At this stage, they observed, an attentive farmer ought to check on his crops once a week.

“When you look at the crop, what do you look for?” I asked.

“There are many different aspects,” Gopal replied. “Is there any sickness (*bīmārī*)? Is there soil moisture (*namī*)? Is the grain (*bāl*) starting to ripen? What is the color (*rang*)? The color indicates the quality.”

If there was any sign of disease, they might opt to apply a pesticide (*davāī*). However, this occurred more frequently with vegetables like potatoes, whose leaves might become blighted or attract insects. But they typically avoided this if they could, as they judged that any gains in yield were likely to be offset by the cost of the pesticides. If there were a lack of soil moisture, and no rainclouds on the horizon, it would be necessary to irrigate. But this was a more pressing concern with rice, which required multiple rounds of irrigation.

“Compared with rice,” Gopal remarked, “Wheat is the easier crop [to grow].” For rice, they had to transplant rice saplings from nurseries to the fields. With wheat, on the other hand, they could spread seeds directly into the field when plowing. In addition to needing less irrigation, the threshing process for wheat was also faster. Gopal and Dinesh owned a threshing machine, and could thus process the grain much more rapidly than they could rice. Growing wheat, they felt, freed them up to do other things.

“How do you know how much grain to plant?”

Dinesh smiled at me. “We know what we need. To feed six or eight people, we know how much we have consumed in previous years. 25 *man* of wheat, 3 *man* of *dāl*, 6 *man* of mustard.” The *man* is a local measure of weight, often Anglicized as “maund,” still widely in use in agriculture in Bihar. It is equivalent to slightly less than 40 kg.

“You have several different plots. How do you decide what to plant where?”

“All of these fields are good for rice and wheat. Some are not as good for *dāl* and mustard (*sarson*). If it didn’t do well in past years, we don’t plant it there again. If it did well, then we know we can plant it.”

Farmers in Amalpur did not attempt the large-scale cultivation of vegetables or other cash crops, even though with recent food inflation those crops were fetching record high prices in the market. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on grains. “Grains used to be costly,” Rakesh said, remembering the shortages of his youth. “Now they’re cheap.” This paradox begs explanation. My neighbors explained that, beyond maintaining small kitchen gardens, farming vegetables was too demanding. Vegetable crops required continual attention throughout the growing season. In contrast to grains like rice and wheat, cultivating vegetables required one to work in the fields day after day with a bent back. Nor did the local agriculture infrastructure easily support the irrigation and security. Many of their fields were located a good distance from the village, far from the irrigation and security needed to grow vegetables on any sort of scale. Upper-caste farmers were largely unwilling to put in this effort. As people who valorized formal education and salaried employment, they considered the work too arduous, and perhaps degrading. Nor could they secure regular labor from the surrounding villages. Even though vegetables were selling for record prices, neither the landowners nor landless laborers believed it was remunerative to undertake this activity.

One exception was that some of the “*backwards*” castes in the area had taken up this enterprise. In the village Jaya Bigha, farmers cultivated tiny plots of onions, garlic, carrots, peas, and cauliflower. They even managed stalks of sugarcane, a crop that was once widely cultivated in the area but that had been largely abandoned because it was so labor-intensive. In the winter

months, the variety of vegetables and profusion of colors provided a contrast against the otherwise monochromatic landscape of grain. With small plots close to their houses, and close to a water source, it was easy for these farmers to look after their plots in the morning and evenings. The village was nestled in a dense grove. People from other villages had no reason to walk through Jaya Bigha. Thus the proximity of the fields to their houses and the isolation of the village protected the crops from theft. The farmers typically sold their produce in neighboring villages, whose residents were eager to purchase fresh local vegetables. If they harvested a large surplus, they would travel to a local wholesale market in a nearby town. But this incurred transportation costs that they would prefer to avoid.

Families in Amalpur were pleased that farmers from Jaya Bigha provided access to locally grown, seasonal produce. Several times a day, these itinerant salesmen passed through the village with radishes overflowing a basket lashed to a bicycle, or hauling a basket of carrots on their heads, announcing the names of their wares. Housewives called out to them, and the men set down their bundle on the threshold. The haggling ensued, with the women sifting through the basket, and then disappearing inside to retrieve the money. In this way, people could regularly provide their families with fresh, locally grown vegetables even when they did not grow the vegetables themselves. As Krishan Kant put it, “We know that any vegetables that they bring to the village are fresh. They don’t have any pesticides. But in the market, we don’t know.”

While the vegetables were best consumed as soon as they had removed them from the ground, rural Biharis believed that staple grains were best when aged slightly. They viewed new grains as dirty (*gandā*) or shabby (*malīn*), noting that they sometimes even black in color. By contrast, old grains were clean and prized for a yellow color. If possible, it was best to eat rice grains at least one year after they were harvested, and to wait at least a few months for pulses.

Wheat was best when aged one to five years. Anything longer than five years was unlikely to be good, but waiting six months was the minimum. The grain, they believed, benefited from a moist environment of the monsoon. Likewise, they avoided taking mustard seeds directly to the press. Waiting a few months, they estimated, allowed the amount of oil released to increase by as much as 40%. Whenever they decided to sell excess crops, they made sure to sell the new grain and keep the ripe older bundles.

Gopal acknowledged that it was only possible to enjoy aged grains if one had the means to do so. “The wheat we are eating now is nine months old—from the last harvest. It’s best to wait until after the monsoon. Those who don’t have the capacity must eat their grains as soon as they harvest it. And city-dwellers aren’t even concerned with this.” To their mind, to eat grains directly from the farm was a sign of desperation.

“The animals don’t like the new grain either,” Gopal observed. “They refuse to eat it. They prefer grain that has aged slightly.”

Both in terms of appearance and taste, they judged older grains superior. “There isn’t that much *taste* in new crops,” Krishan Kant said, using the English word. But the most important quality of matured grains was that they promoted good digestion.

Krishan Kant and Gopal recalled how, during their childhood, their grandmother had kept one hundred years worth of rice in a container in her storeroom.

I had never heard of anything like this before, and the idea captivated me. I pictured her with different vintages of rice, arranged like bottles of wine, in rows of labeled jars. They laughed at my reverie. That was not what life in rural Bihar was like.

Each year, they recalled, their grandmother added a few grains of rice from the most recent crop to a vessel, mixing the various vintages, as it were, together. This was her “hobby”

(*shauk*)—collecting rice. But the rice had medicinal qualities as well. If someone in the family fell sick, she would prepare rice from this mixture and that would clean (*sāf karnā*) their stomach. Their grandmother and her collection of rice dating back to the nineteenth century had long since gone, but their affinity for matured grains remained.

The one exception to the consumption of matured grains was the rice used in religious ceremonies, such as Chhath Puja. (I discuss this festival at length in chapter 6.) For these festivals, it was necessary to use rice from the recent harvest. If the harvest was not completed by that time, as it typically was not, farmers went to the fields to cut a few stalks of rice. The reason for this was that the worship is in part an offering, gratitude for the bountiful harvest. They considered these grains pure (*pavitra*) because it had been offered to God (*bhagwān*) as *prasād*.

One day, not long after I returned to the village from a trip to the archives, I asked Rakesh about the crops that they used to grow in the village. The Patna District edition of the *Bihar & Orissa District Gazetteers*, first published in 1907 and revised in 1924, recorded a number of crops grown in area. (Nalanda district was part of Patna district until it was split off in 1976.) In describing the eating habits of the local population ninety years earlier, the *Gazetteers* noted that rice and wheat were not nearly as prominent as they had become since the Green Revolution. Instead, other cereals were more widely consumed.

Rice, which is the staple food of the people in Bengal, is not the staple food of the poor in Patna district, but rather that of the fairly well-to-do. The mass of people live on bannocks made of flour prepared from wheat or one of many kinds of coarse grains and pulses. These cakes are accompanied by vegetables, salt, and a few simple condiments; and the meal is varied by a porridge of the

same. Maize is eaten whenever it can be procured, and also arhat (*cajanus indicus*) either in the form of flour or as a thick pottage. Marua (*eleusine coracana*) is consumed largely in the Bihar subdivision, and besides this many kinds of millets and pulses form part of the cultivator's dictionary. Among the poorer classes the morning meal usually consists of parched or boiled grains of various sorts, and the evening meal of boiled rice, with dal or pulses and occasionally vegetable curries (O'Malley & James 1924, 49-50).

The diversity of millets stands in contrast to the present-day, when rice and wheat dominate as grains. Some farmers do grow millets in the winter or summer growing seasons, but these do not comprise a large part of the local diet. Elsewhere, the authors note that *maruā* was a millet grown in the monsoon and consumed when the rice crop failed (O'Malley & James 1924, 85). It was made into a coarse bread of *sattū* grain. *Sattū* is a flour mixture still widely consumed and particularly associated with Bihar. Today it is often made with chickpea flour (*besan*).

By contrast, *maruā*, also known as *rāgī*, has fallen out of favor. Its status as a “famine food” may have made it useful in the past, as Bhrigupati Singh notes (Singh 2015, 113). But I soon found it was a part of the Bihari culinary imaginary that many people were eager to leave behind.

“What was *maruā* like?” I wondered. Had he ever tasted it?

Rakesh laughed. “*Maruā*? *Maruā* is disgusting!” His face contorted in revulsion, as if he was about to vomit.

This was not what I had expected. I had fond memories of eating warm and wholesome

bājarā (pearl millet) *rotīs* when I had lived in Rajasthan, years earlier. Apparently, the equivalent here was not millet, but dishes made of *sattū*.

Still, I was not about to give up so easily. “Do you think I could I try some?” I persisted. If possible, I wanted to know what Bihar tasted like one hundred years earlier. And I was compelled by Singh’s argument that a world which ate more millets would a more gentle and more just world (Singh 2015, 116-117).

Rakesh hesitated. “It might be difficult to find. It’s no longer grown in the area. You won’t find it in the market.” Not even the most abject people were compelled to eat it anymore. And indeed I did not have a chance to try *maruā*, or many other millets. They simply were not available, and my neighbors had no interest in going to the trouble of procuring them for me.

Along with the reverie for the foods of the past, a time when grains were heartier and richer in taste, their nostalgia was tempered by memories of poverty and loss. They did not want to return to a time when the roads flooded, and the labor was more grinding. They appreciated the boosted yields and efficiencies of modern agriculture. But despite these compulsions, they carved out a space for their preference for consuming more fortifying varieties.

Labor: Sharecropping, Injury, and the Wages of Toil

Walking one late afternoon through the grove to the west of the village, I came across some young Bhumihar men from Amalpur. They were sitting in the grass, talking amongst themselves. Off in the distance, at the far edge of the fields, trucks and motorbikes darted past on the main road that led to the nearby towns, and, eventually to the state capital, Patna. But this place was quiet, far removed from all that. These young men had formed the habit of gathering here each evening. The air was cool, and though they were not drinking or smoking, they could

relax a bit, removed from the watchful eyes of their elders.

They beseeched me to join them, and I sat down on the ground next to them. When I did so, they continued their diatribe about the ills facing Bihar.

“We were once landlords (*zamīndār*) here. Our ancestors used to own all the land in this area. They even owned land 10 km from here! They would make all the other rural castes work for them. Then, when India became independent, the rule of landlords (*zamīndārī*) was abolished. So at that time we became farmers. Now the lower castes do not fear of us. They used to touch our feet, and now they do not. They should have fear! But Nitish will give our lands away. The laborers can claim they did all the work and should get the land. They can spit on the land and claim it.”

Though the young men in the grove had added rhetorical flourishes, this narrative about upper-caste misfortunes was common in Amalpur. They were referring to Nitish Kumar, the popular Chief Minister of Bihar. He led the Janata Dal (United), a regional party that drew its support from the numerically populous “*backwards*” castes, such as the Kurmis, to which he himself belonged. For most of my time in Amalpur, the Chief Minister remained broadly popular. My neighbors credited him with improving the security situation and the economy. And they appreciated his local roots; he hailed from the other side of the district. But during the run-up to the 2014 national elections, the Bhumihars in Amalpur threw their support to Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party. Their chief objection was that lower-caste groups had benefited from reservations and other redistributive social programs at their expense. They felt increasingly confronted by the growing clout of Kurmis, in particular, and pointed to numerous instances where local Kurmi men had gained coveted government postings. They considered the current administration inimical to their interests. They feared that it would erode their power,

access to secure employment, and control over the land.

For centuries, a system of bonded labor prevailed in this region of Bihar in which upper-caste landlords – the ancestors of current residents of Amalpur – patronized lower-caste landless laborers and artisans from nearby settlements in the *jajmāni* system, paying them in kind for their labor and services (Prakash 1990; Raheja 1988). With rising lower-caste assertiveness during the twentieth century, this system had largely faded. Agricultural laborers were no longer bonded to a particular household, and many sought to improve their fortunes beyond the village. For certain caste occupations (such as potters, barbers, and nurses), and according to the choice of largely older individuals who appreciated the security, these forms of patronage persisted.

But the last several decades of Dalit assertion in India have altered the expectations of lower-caste agricultural workers. Compared with the system of bonded labor that prevailed in earlier times, lower-caste rural people increasingly avoided the indignity of farm labor and migrated to other states in search of employment. Just as landowners reckoned with the pressures of the capitalized rural sphere, marginal landowners and landless rural people depended on the income from off-farm wage labor to secure the necessities of life. Agricultural labor in the area was typically paid in kind, not cash, and thus less attractive. Whereas once landowners in Amalpur exerted substantial control over the labor force comprised of landless lower-caste residents, laborers from Govindopur, a lower-caste village nearby, now commanded a greater share of the bargaining power. Despite improvements in agricultural technology, only plowing was mechanized, and farming activities like irrigating, harvesting, and threshing required intense manual labor.

As Rakesh recalled, “[Laborers] used to come from [the next village], begging for work. Now there’s been a big change. Many of the men have gone out of the village [for work]. We

used to split the crops 10 kg for the landlord, 1 kg for the worker. Now it's 1 kg to 1 kg." Just as the market price of the grains that they grew had fallen, Rakesh lamented the labor market had also flipped against them. Once laborers congregated at the thresholds of landlords' houses in Amalpur, pleading for any sort of day work that could provide them with grain. Now farmers in need of labor were compelled to track laborers down in their own villages, hoping that they would turn up as promised. In India, power is associated with centrality and solidity; those who must travel seeking favors, by contrast, are considered supplicants and subordinates (Raheja 1988).

For Bhumihar farmers, this shift in the dynamics of the labor market reflected a broader shift in which upper-caste farmers have lost control of their lives. Farmers in Amalpur frequently referred to themselves as "unemployed" (*berozgār*), even if they were occupied with the agricultural work—e.g., plowing, harvesting, taking care of animals, taking grains to market. In local parlance, a man was "employed" when he held a secure, income-generating job—preferably a government position. Others worked as clerks, salesmen, and teachers in private schools. Even these positions were difficult to find, and there were many educated upper-caste men who despite their educational status could not find any paid employment whatsoever (cf. Jeffrey 2010).

Yet at the same time as they bemoaned their "unemployment," landowners in Amalpur regularly complained about the "*labor problem*." By this they meant there was a shortage of laborers to work their fields. They grumbled that this trend had been accelerated by MNREGA, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act that entitles adults from BPL (Below the Poverty Line) households to work on rural infrastructure projects. Farmers complained that they could not compete with the daily rate of approximately Rs. 150 (US \$2.50).

Laborers had become reluctant to work for less. Although upper-caste landowners and lower-caste workers clashed over issues of compensation, this fundamental political economic struggle between capital and labor was not reproduced in state politics. Because of the entangled and often unexpected nature of caste alliances in Bihar, it turned out that the Bharatiya Janata Party (which the Bhumihars supported) and Lok Janshakti Party (which the Paswans from Govindpur supported) were both allied against the Kurmi-supported Janata Dal (United). Both the Bhumihars and Paswans objected to reservations from which they were excluded. This resulted in an interlocking alliance in which the groups at the top and the bottom of the social hierarchy were arrayed against the middle. In this way, party politics subsumed the central agrarian conflict of the area.

However, it is notable that Bhumihar farmers in Amalpur did not consider their simultaneous complaints about their unemployment and “*labor problem*” a paradox at all. This was because, despite their caste identity as cultivators, they did not consider it fitting for upper-caste men to take up intensive agricultural labor. Formal education was the proper site of investment, even if the payoff was far from certain. Many young Bhumihar men had graduated from high school, or even earned a college degree. As they look towards the service sector for employment, they deem agricultural toil unsuitable and even demeaning for those who aspired to middle-class comforts. It was not considered too arduous to plant broad fields of grains, pulses, and oilseeds, especially when hiring laborers to assist in the endeavor. But cultivating vegetables on any sort of large scale was not seen as feasible for an upper-caste farmer. Vegetables were much more time-consuming and required constant menial labor. To have ended up engaged primarily in agriculture rather than salaried work would disrupt their narrative of progress.

In order to secure labor for the entire cropping season, landowners in Amalpur make oral agreements with sharecroppers (*baṭāīdār*), who they frequently refer to using the English word “*partner*.” The two parties split the proceeds of the crop 50/50—a ratio that was more favorable to sharecroppers than in the past. The landowner contribute the land, while the sharecropper contributes the labor necessary to plant, irrigate, fertilize, harvest, and process the grains. They equally contribute the capital for seeds, fertilizer, and diesel. In practice, however, sharecroppers do not often have enough money, and so the landowner advances the money and recovers this contribution during the final division of the crop.

The system is attractive to both landowner and laborer because it ensures that while other members of the household leave the village to earn a wage, there will still be rice and wheat to eat in the coming year. It reflects an effort by both parties to find a workable balance between growing food and earning an income. Sharecroppers can work in the village for the season, and then travel outside the village for a few months to supplement agriculture with wage labor. Likewise, landowners in Amalpur who work in distant cities can be absent for months at a time and still be confident that someone is tending to their fields. It also enables a farmer like Rakesh to spend his days working in a salaried job outside of the village. And it allows a child like Rishu to attend school and after-school tuition programs. Many poor children, by contrast, skip school during the harvest season to help their parents in the fields.

At the level of bodily experience, too, upper-caste men avoided engaging in arduous manual labor. This was somewhat at odds with a rural ethos of resourcefulness in which these men took care of livestock and repaired the house themselves. But they were educated people, who aimed to work with their minds and keep their clothes clean. To over-exert themselves, they believed, would throw their system out of balance. If they labored so intensely, Rakesh pointed

out, they would need to eat much more to replenish their energy and forego an income. By contrast, they claimed that lower-caste bodies were more constitutionally suited to the sweat and muck that was bound up with agricultural toil.

As the paddy ripened, I was intent on understanding what quality of bodily labor this agricultural work demanded. My neighbors tried to dissuade me, just as they did when I asked if I could milk the cow. They viewed this work as unsuitable for my status as a guest and an educated man. I insisted. My forays into farming activities were limited, for reasons that I explain below. But during those days, I came to see just how much time and effort was needed to turn standing paddy into edible rice. Even a few hours in the field let me sweaty, itchy, hungry, and sore. My clothes were soiled. My muscles ached. But it was also what was needed to restock the storeroom.

One morning before the harvest, I went to the market to purchase a sickle (*hansiyā*, or *hasuā* in Magahi) that farmers use to harvest their crops. It cost me Rs. 40 (US \$0.67).

When I returned to the village, Rakesh's brother Ramesh picked it up. "Hmm. It'll do," he said, inspecting the curved, serrated iron blade and the sturdiness of the wooden handle. "But you paid too much for it."

A few days later, I walked out to the fields west of the village with Ramesh. The ground was dry and hard, the paddy golden and baking in the sun. Nand Kishore and his wife Kunti Devi were hard at work when we arrived. They had started earlier that morning, and had already harvested one third of the plot.

Nand Kishore was shirtless in the late morning sun, with a cloth (*gamchā*) wrapped around his head and his *lungī* wrapped tightly around his waist. He squatted in a deep crouch in front of a row of grain, both of his bare feet flat on the ground. Leaning forward a bit, he held

sickle in his right hand and grabbed several stalks of paddy in his left hand. Holding the grain tightly, he positioned the blade about an inch above the base of the plants, and then yanked the sickle through the paddy. His movement was fluid, sure. Without adequate force, the blade would not slice cleanly through the stems. Then he shifted his weight forward, gathered a second bundle of paddy in his hands, and cut again.

After four or five cuts, he swiveled around, and laid the grain on the ground in a neat row behind him. They left the paddy to dry out there for a few days. Once the work of harvesting the paddy was complete, they returned to tie the dried grain into small bundles (*aṭṭī*, or *aṭṭionī* in Magahi). They then roped together those small bundles into large bales. The laborers hauled those bales across the fields, to the threshing area (*kaliyān*) near the village. Because farmers were rushing to complete harvest and plant their *rabī* crops at this time, they restacked the dried paddy into a huge circular haystack (*pinj*) the size and shape of a hut. They carefully arranged the dried paddy so that the grain pointed inward to protect it from pests and water. Dozens of these stacks sat at the edges of the settlement, as if they were a mini-village. Once the winter planting was complete and the weather had warmed up, the farmers and their laborers threshed the paddy, either by hand or machine, sorting, cleaning, and packing the grain into sacks. That process took weeks. Farmers brought these sacks to a nearby town to mill when needed, and saved the chaff (*bhūsā*, or *bichālī* in Magahi) as fodder (*cārā*) for their livestock.

This entire process of extracting edible grain from paddy lasted months and required intensive manual labor at each stage. But on that first morning of the harvest, it was far from our minds. Still in a crouch, Nand Kishore inched forward a bit, ready to cut the next row of grain. After studying his technique, I set down to work next to him. He chuckled at the strangeness of this—a foreign visitor engaging in manual labor. Each time I inched forward, butterflies fled

from the safety of the plants, fluttering in the sky above me. My hair, face, and arms quickly became covered with dust and straw. I could feel the strain gathering in my arms and legs. I was not as swift or sure as Nand Kishore, but I found my own pace.

Crouching there, focused on the row before of us, we could not see past the paddy that formed the border around the field. It was as if it were a wall, enclosing us in a private world. It was only upon standing up to stretch that I realized this broad flat field that stretched from Amalpur to Govindpur was buzzing with activity, dozens of men and women engaged in the work of harvesting, plowing, irrigating and hauling.

During those early days of the harvest, I made a point of joining the laborers and putting in a few hours of work. The fields were a social space. Without any other childcare available, laborers brought their small children along with them. Some people strung a piece of cloth between two upright sticks, so they might be able to play in the shade. People also brought their breakfast or lunch with them to the fields. They paused in the middle of the day to replenish their energy with rice, vegetables, and *dāl*. They drank intently from old water bottles, and sometimes lay in the shade to rest.

On the morning of Deepawali, I went to help Ramesh harvest the plot of paddy by their big mango tree. Nothing pleased my neighbors more than to see me dressed in a *lungī*, walking to the fields with my sickle. Ramesh worked on one side of the plot, and I worked on the other. The sun was blazing that day, but it felt satisfying to get hungry and dirty doing this work. I concentrated intently on each cut, taking care to make sure my fingers were clear of the blade. I had kicked off my sandals next to me. “I’m getting the hang of this,” I thought. Sometimes I squatted, and sometimes I stood upright and bent over; Nand Kishore used both techniques intermittently as a way of relieving the strain.

As I neared the end of the row and was preparing to finish up for the day, I felt the jagged blade slice into my second toe on my left foot. Watching the blood spurt out, I let out a little cry.

“Got fed up, eh?” Chun-Chun called out.

I grunted.

He stood and began musing about the finer points of cutting paddy. Wandering over to me, he suddenly saw me lying on the ground, with my leg elevated, pressing my *lungī* against my bleeding foot.

“What? Have you cut yourself?”

Another grunt.

“Well, don’t lie down!”

In a voice that surprised me with its composure and its grammatical accuracy, I asked him, “Would you mind going up to the house and fetching me a bandage?”

He dropped his sickle and ran for the house. I lay there, looking at the sky.

A few minutes later, Krishan Kant and Anjali came running with a medical kit and bottle of water. They doused my wound in antiseptic, and wrapped a piece of cloth around it. We walked back to the house together. Then, at my instance, Krishan Kant took me on the motorcycle to the small clinic at the junction of the main road. People watched as I hobbled my way to the bench. The doctor redressed the wound and gave me a tetanus shot.

I walked around the village with a huge bandage on my toe that I reapplied regularly. My neighbors laughed, but I was taking no chances. The gash in my toe healed after a few weeks. But acceding to the request of my neighbors, and my parents at home, I retired from my harvesting activities. I handed Ramesh my sickle, and he stored it away in the rafters of the courtyard.

My injury, however, did not compare with the sorts of pain that laborers with no other option had to endure. A month or so later, I met Nand Kishore and Kunti Devi in the fields one afternoon. They had finished cutting the paddy, and needed only to finish hauling away the bales. These bales were massive, 30-50 kg in weight. Once the ropes that lashed the bundles together were secured, two people lifted the bales and positioned them onto a person's head. A person then carried the bundles a few hundred meters along the raised, narrow embankments (*bāndh*) that transect the fields, to the threshing area on the outskirts of the village where the crops will be stacked and stored.

I had once volunteered to carry one of these bundles, over the objections of my hosts, so that I might know what it was like. Of course, I had carried heavy things before. But what struck me about this was how long the walk was. It was a trek that lasted ten minutes or more, and there was no chance to set down the bale and rest. Crossing the field meant balance on the narrow, uneven embankments that cut across the fields. These earthen embankments were not of uniform size, but varied in height and thickness. It was like walking on a balance beam, carrying a heavy load as pieces of dust and straw coated my face and arms, as a thin line of sweat dribbled down my forehead and dripped into my eyes, obscuring my vision.

Upon arriving in the field that day, I was surprised to find Kunti Devi, limping badly. I had just spent the afternoon with them earlier that week, and she was not injured then.

Kunti Devi's normally sunny voice filled with anguish. "Oh, brother! I fell!" A few days earlier, while carrying a load of paddy she slipped on one of the embankments. I had tripped once myself, on the slick morning dew, and although the ground appeared soft, it felt like landing on concrete.

Yet there was Kunti Devi, wincing in evident pain, having walked a kilometer from her

house, putting in a full day's work. She could not walk with a heavy load in her condition, but she helped hoist the bales onto the heads of others. So while Nand Kishore and their two children hauled off the final bales, she hobbled around the plot, gleaning stray grains to take home.

Kunti Devi's struggle underscored the complex relationship between economic security and bodily security. For many rural Biharis, going out to work was the only way to secure the body—to make sure that the family has good food to eat and a comfortable home. The paradox was that in doing so they put their own bodies at risk. Despite the fact that they had been working the land from a young age, over the course of the season minor cuts and strained muscles accumulated. This peril was perhaps most evident in the case of laborers who traveled on top of the roof of an overcrowded bus, or had to consume suspect food in locales far from home. But they were present on the farm as well.

Cultivating the land, I had learned, came with risks. I had arrived expecting to contribute my labor. But in fact there was little to do that did not require carrying very heavy things or exposing my body to wounds from sharp objects. In participating in their fieldwork, I have had to rearticulate ideas of my own. My body, they insisted, was unaccustomed with this work. At each stage, there were perilous activities from which I've had to abstain: When plowing, two men ride tottering atop a heavy wooden plank (*conkī*) hitched to the back of the tractor, used to level the land. Another popular device, the power tiller, a hand-pushed machine that resembled a lawnmower, was handy but considered exceptionally dangerous (*khatarnāk*) because the person operating it came so close to the blades. Krishna Devi instructed Rakesh to sell their machine when a friend severely wounded his ankle in an accident. Another boy from the next village was tossed over the tiller. The doctor had to amputate his leg in order to save his life. Similarly, when using the threshing machine, they took care to ensure that their fingers do not get caught in the

fast spinning metal hooks that stripped the rice grain from the rest of the fiber. For each of these time-saving pieces of equipment, tales of accidents and mangled limbs abound.

Rather than romanticizing agricultural labor as a type of communion that links rural people to the land, many people considered the work repetitive, exhausting, and, sometimes dangerous. No one who could avoid it would choose to spend their days carrying 50 kg loads of paddy across on their heads while balancing on narrow embankments for ten minutes at a time. Yet with stomachs to fill, resting up to be in full health was a luxury Kunti Devi could not afford.

Conclusion: Locating the Farmer

In Kajri Jain's analysis of the economies of Indian calendar art, Jain considers the incorporation of secular images within this sacred pantheon. She includes an undated picture titled *Young Farmer* by the artist S. V. Aras. This picture, rendered in the style of socialist realism, depicts a smiling, cherub-cheeked baby wearing a turban and an undershirt, proudly grasping a sickle. In the foreground, men and women transplant rice from a nursery. In a background, a tractor plows evenly spaced furrows in an idyllic rural landscape (Jain 2007, 167). Jain argues that in the depiction of "these very health, very pink children ... happily playing at technological modernity" both the subject and its various poses connote auspiciousness (Jain 2007, 284). Like the images of Hindu deities, cows, and freedom fighters, this baby farmer too comes to symbolize the nation. The picture belongs to an age that heralded the humble, industrious farmer as an iconic figure who was entrusted with the responsibility of feeding a hungry nation.

There were many residents in Amalpur, particularly older men, who were precisely this sort of figure. They were born in this village, 50 or 60 years ago. They had never held a salaried

job. Season after season, they tended to their lands, harvested their crops, and produced surpluses. One day in the future, they would die in their village, and their property would pass to their sons.

But for many of my neighbors, particularly the younger men, such a life was increasingly out of reach. Even for the landed upper castes, the security of rural life was cracking in subtle ways. They expected that as long as they had their land, they would have enough to eat. But they also anticipated and feared that a future subdivision of lands would make their children land-poor. People in Amalpur respected farmers for their hard work and ability to provide for themselves. But it was not considered a high status position. Being a farmer without a salaried position hampered the marital prospects of many young men. They struggled to generate interest, and it reduced the dowry they could command. Faced with the capitalization of rural life, they believed that off-farm income was necessary to sustain the household.

What I encountered in rural Bihar was a gradual dispossession—a slow process unfolding over decades and generations rather than months and years. There was no easily identifiable agent of this change—no greedy corporation, callous state, or shortsighted policy to blame (cf. Levien 2012). Rather, their changing circumstances were a product of demography and an unfavorable position within land, labor, and commodity markets. This introduced instability in the iconic image of farmer as provider. Their survival depended on their agricultural output. But they were also forced by their circumstances to contemplate and plan for a future beyond agriculture. What would become of the next generation? Would there be enough land to feed their families? Would their children want to work it?

In addition to heightening the stakes of their own lives and labor, this shift has important implications for the ways that scholars conceptualize of agriculture and the rural sphere. Rather

than separating rural and urban as distinct entities, rural Biharis are increasingly dependent on off-farm work to survive. Across their lives, and even within a given day, they move back and forth between their village and towns and cities. Such movement points to the inadequacy of many of the scholarly terminology for describing people who support their families by cultivating the land.

Yet, often in the literature and popular discourse on agrarian South Asia, the farmer is a presumed to be subject whose identity and history is seen as self-evident (cf. Gupta 1998, Vasavi 2012, Stone 2014). These discussions overlook the fact people engaged in farming activities are often mobile, frequently moving beyond the village, and sometimes beyond the rural sphere itself, for sustained periods. These men and women were not wedded to farming but engaged in a diverse set of economic practices in order to sustain the household. How might we make sense of “farmer” as a meaningful analytical category, when their lives and locations were so fluid?

A brief anecdote illustrates this conceptual fuzziness. One December afternoon, a gloriously mild and serene day, I set out for the fields with Gopal and Krishan Kant. It was the day that they planned to sow wheat seeds in their adjacent fields, which had been inherited and subdivided from their grandfather. Each man carried two bags—one of seeds, the other of fertilizers. Nand Kishore, who worked as a sharecropper for both families, joined us there.

It was the high season for plowing winter crops. The tractor driver was busy from dawn to dusk, circling tiny plots while farmers paced the fields with purposeful, even strides, tossing seeds and fertilizer onto the earth. When we reached their fields, we sat down atop their sacks as we waited for the tractor to arrive.

There was some delay, perhaps an hour or so. Eventually, I lay down on the narrow, grassy embankment between two fields of dirt and closed my eyes. While I was napping,

Krishan Kant picked up my camera and snapped a photo of me. I am curled up, wearing a blue *lungī* and an old, red sweatshirt, my sandals lying at my feet. It is one of my favorite portraits of field work. On that unhurried afternoon, time just trailed off into the distance.

“I was a farmer (*kisān*) my whole life,” Gopal remarked sometime, after I had roused myself. “But two years ago, we began to take part in the sharecropping system.” Gopal was in his late 30s, and had a full-time job as a sales representative for a beverage company in the district headquarters. With his work schedule, he spent his days removed from the agrarian world. But he made an effort to attend important events to make sure the work was done properly.

“So if you are not a farmer, then who is? Nand Kishore?” I asked.

“No, I’m not a farmer,” Nand Kishore waved me off. “I’m just *labor*.”

Nand Kishore was 51 years old and lived in Govindpur, his natal village. As a young man, he had migrated out of the village for work. He found a job working in a factory manufacturing blankets in a nearby city. Fifteen years ago, Krishan Kant’s father sought him out and asked him to return to agricultural work. His family did not own land, so he worked as a sharecropper for both Krishan Kant and Gopal’s families. They contributed the land and capital to their joint enterprise, while Nand Kishore and his family contributed the labor: planting, irrigating, and harvesting the crops by hand. He found that he preferred to work in the open air, without a factory boss hectoring him about piece-work.

“There, you earn only based on what you produce,” he reflected. “Granted, I’m a sharecropper. But I still prefer this.” Although he may have been performing deference to his employers, Nand Kishore was also making the point that the farmer is the one who owns the land and makes decisions regarding it.

“I suppose I am a farmer,” Krishan Kant volunteered.

He did not often identify himself in this way. More frequently, he called himself “unemployed” (*berozgar*). Krishan Kant and I were the same age, 30, but our lives were different. He had a high school degree but had failed to secure a government position. So he spent his days in the village, helping to provision the household and oversee Nand Kishore’s labor. Although he enjoyed living in the village and helping out in the household, neither Krishan Kant nor the rest of his family members considered this an ideal occupation for him. A few years earlier, he had gone to Delhi to work in a call center. But he had struggled with the work, particularly the quotas and long bus ride to the office, and had returned to Bihar.

He may have been a farmer on that day, but he did not remain one for long. A few months after that afternoon in the fields, Krishan Kant had again left the village for Delhi. Krishna Devi and Rakesh realized that the household needed more money. As an able-bodied man, they sent Krishan Kant to stay with his brother Rajesh, who helped him find work as a labor contractor. One month he was spreading wheat seeds in Bihar, the next he was standing on a construction site for a luxury apartment complex in the capital. His life was marked by disruption, unexpected transitions, and reversals.

Several generations ago, Krishan Kant and Gopal’s ancestors were landlords who owned this land. They were engaged full-time in overseeing the work of the people they employed, like Nand Kishore’s ancestors, as tenants and laborers. Now they contracted Nand Kishore as a sharecropper on some of their land, splitting the proceeds 50/50. They cultivated some of their land on their own, hiring laborers – paid in cash, or more often, in kind – for the most intensive planting and harvesting tasks. The land remained their primary means of subsistence, and critical to their livelihoods. But because of the capitalization of rural life, they needed money to survive.

They sold their surplus yield in local markets, and men sought salaried employment in cities near and far.

While some people called themselves farmers (*kisān*), this term more frequently arose as a political category. More typically, Gopal, Krishan Kant, and others in Amlapur identified as rural people (*dehātī* or *grāmīn log*). From their perspective, their way of talking, eating habits, style of dress, etc. all marked them as belonging to the rural sphere. This was true even when their work took them out of the village. Instead of identifying themselves by occupation, rural people typically described themselves as engaged in *khetī-baṛī* (farming and gardening) or *khetī-grhstī* (farming and household work). These catch-all phrases were useful because they encompassed a range of daily activities, reflecting the ways in which farming and household work were conjoined instead of separate spheres of rural life. For instance, arranging for the storage of harvest grain, rinsing and sifting it when household stocks have run low, taking the grain to the mill, repairing machinery and sweeping out the storeroom were all aspects of *khetī-grhstī* that are neither strictly farm work nor housework, but nonetheless essential to sustaining the rural household.

How to make sense of a world where the farmer avoided farming, and the cultivator hired others to do the cultivating on his behalf? In reality, men like Gopal and Krishan Kant did not do farming (*khetī karnā*) so much as cause laborers and tenants like Nand Kishore to do farming on their behalf (*khetī karvānā*). Yet even emphasizing the subtle distinctions between the causative verb form and transitive verb form in Hindi does not clarify the situation. In reality, there were varying levels of engagement and labor, and this engagement shifted based on circumstance. Some farmers in Amalpur, particularly those who lived outside of the village, met with their tenants only at the end of the season, to receive their share of the crop. Others who were locally

present, like Krishan Kant, were involved in a regular basis in the work of cultivation, often contributing a significant amount of their own labor alongside their laborers.

Given this situation, the terms “landlord,” “peasant,” and “farmer” do not map neatly onto their experience. They depended on the land for survival, but their fortunes were bound up in labor and commodity markets as well. Despite discussions about the possibility for “re-peasantization” (van der Ploeg 2010) of agriculture in South Asia and beyond, few families in Amalpur thought it was possible or desirable to sever their ties with the urban sphere. To their minds, both urban employment and rural cultivation were necessary to sustain the family.

Vasavi proposes using the term “agriculturalist” as a means of encapsulating all types of cultivators (Vasavi 2012, 6-7). Peasants, she contends, cultivate the land primarily for their own subsistence, while farmers produce crops primarily for commercial markets. Even though farmers in Amalpur kept most of what they grew for household consumption, it was impossible for most of them to sustain the family without salaried work. Besides this fact, many scholars have dismissed the term “peasant” as pejorative. And even the dichotomy she poses is not widely accepted. On the ground in Bihar, moreover, the situation was not so clear-cut. Farmers’ decisions about subsistence vs. commercial cultivation were not always made in advance; they settled them later in response to the household needs. The problem, however, with using the term “agriculturalist” is that it effaces the real differences in property, labor, and time expenditure between actors in the rural sphere.

Rather than starting with an a priori assumption about who is the legitimate subject of agriculture, it is necessary to attend to the specificities of these circumstances. Doing so requires considering the various forms of investment, labor, and care that are the conditions of possibility for food production. In this dissertation, I use the terms “farmer,” “sharecropper,” and “laborer”

to describe people the different positionalities of actors in agriculture, in part because they remain most accessible for my audience. But even these terms fail to account for the uncertainty, fluidity and transience of rural lives. And they do not encapsulate the pressures and ambivalences that people feel when they think about the future of agriculture in Bihar.

Chapter 3

Tenuous Livelihoods, Temporary Schemes: Articulations of Precarity and Resourcefulness

There was a ditch in the road, a ditch that I came to know quite well. I walked across it many times each day. It was located on the road that led south out of the village of Amalpur, just around the corner from my house, and a literal stone's throw from the houses of Rakesh and Gopal, my hosts there. This was the only road connecting the village with the main road, one kilometer away. In the other direction, it provided access to roughly a dozen other villages. For this reason it was known officially as the Amalpur-Govindpur road, though people in Amalpur never used that name. Previously it had been unpaved (*kaccā*) road, but the state government had paved (*pakkā*) five years earlier. They had erected a plaque testifying to this.

Just as the road emerged from the village, as it ran alongside a small pond on one side and a grove of trees on the other, it dipped. This dip was pronounced enough that a ditch had formed. It was ten feet across, and five feet wide, an uneven surface that was difficult to navigate in a vehicle. During the monsoon season, and for months afterward, the ditch filled with water, and it was a challenge to pass. During the rest of the year, it was just a dry hole that disrupted traffic.

The road saw a lot of traffic. Farmers from Amalpur used this road to reach their fields to the south. And hundreds of people from villages beyond used this route to access the main road, where buses took them to the markets and government offices in the towns beyond. Full-sized trucks, carrying heavy loads of bricks from a nearby brick kiln. Bullock-driven carts, weighed down with sacks of grains, headed for the depot. Auto-rickshaws and jeeps ferried children to private schools in nearby towns. Motorcycles, which twenty years ago were such a rare sight in

the village that children would come running, passed by in bunches.

The pedestrians could walk to one side, or hop from one stone to the next. Experienced motorcyclists, those who passed through on a daily basis, I noticed, had mastered precisely where to break, where to enter the ditch, and how to maneuver their way through the obstruction. Sometimes, though, if there were multiple people riding along, or the driver was hauling something heavy, the vehicle stalled. The trucks and bullock carts, meanwhile, had to slow on their approach, and then accelerated to clear ditch.

Those trucks that bounded through imprudently made a dreadful sound, their merchandise clattering wildly in the metal carrier. On a few occasions, the uneven surface of the road caused sacks of grain to fall. All this disrupted the peacefulness of the grove, a shady, breezy refuge where cows were moored, children played cricket in the afternoon, and where my neighbors and I liked to lean against a tree.

“Why doesn’t the government fix the road?” I asked.

“They should. But they won’t,” Gopal replied. “They will do other things.” The state government had just completed work on this road a few years earlier. They would allocate the money for other road construction projects, in places where the road was not already paved. The panchayat, the local government council, had some funds for this sort of work, at least hypothetically, but they were installing a drainage ditch along the main road instead.

Gopal recalled that the roads were much worse in the past. “The roads here were terrible. The puddles (*kīcar*) were so big. Whenever we’d go to the market, we’d be covered in mud by the time we arrived.”

And so this small ditch persisted, one small annoyance among many.

Then one evening, a truck from the local brick kiln pulled up to the edge of the ditch. The

owners of the kiln had instructed their driver to fill the hole. A small crowd of us from the village gathered to watch as two men from the kiln climbed down from the truck.

“This road has caused the owners a lot of annoyance and loss,” my neighbor Madhur observed. Their trucks rumbled through frequently, and suffered wear from potholes like these. “So they decided to fix it on their own.”

The men began pouring dirt, sand, and small pieces of broken and crushed bricks into the hole, spreading the mixture around and firming it up. After a few minutes, they continued on their way. They had alleviated, at least for a while, the worst of the obstruction, making the road less treacherous. But over time the loose dirt and sand was swept away, and a few weeks later, the ditch had returned to the way it was. It was a temporary solution in a place accustomed to them.

In this chapter, I examine articulations of precarity and instability in rural Bihar. In addition, I trace how people respond to the poor infrastructure, lack of opportunities, and sense of vulnerability that they face in their everyday lives. Following anthropologists who have underscored the importance of unpacking local idioms of precarity (Muehlebach 2013), I take the ideas of tenuousness as a point of departure for considering how rural Biharis diagnose their economic fortunes and navigate these adverse circumstances. My neighbors in Amalpur used the Hindi word *asthāyī* – meaning temporary, unsteady, or of short duration – to describe the economic and physical landscape they inhabited. In doing so, they contrasted it with the Hindi word *stāyī*, meaning permanent and long-lasting, and thus more reliable and desirable. This dichotomy between the permanent and the temporary, between a secured future and a tenuous present, was one they often mobilized to describe their experiences of vulnerability across different areas of economic life.

Speaking of “temporariness” underscored their sense of exposure to the market. It also served as a critique of the structural changes that were eroding the security of rural life. But although it functioned as a lament of their situation, it also represented an assertion of their own resilience. Against the continued precarity of rural life, Biharis highlighted the local ethos of resourcefulness as a habitus essential for survival. They lauded their ability to survive through self-provisioning, emphasizing their adeptness at utilizing whatever resources and materials were at hand or cobbled together from the local environment. Attending to this practice of resourcefulness reveals a form of agency that they felt they could exert in shaping their lives.

Rural people’s ability to provision their households was not just contingent on the local environment. It was also shaped by the opportunities extended by the government and in the market. With a dearth of employment opportunities and gaps in public infrastructure, temporary schemes of all sorts have proliferated in Bihar. The English word “*scheme*” has permeated the work of government and many industries in India, leading to the rise of what I call “scheme-based thinking.” This mode of action is not based on advanced planning, but on a reaction to the changing circumstances they faced.

Rural Bihari society is marked by high levels of inequality between dominant landowners and landless laborers. Finding no possibility for advancement at home, many poor families migrated to other parts of the country. Others remained in the village, forging a livelihood through agriculture labor and whatever off-farm manual labor they could find. It would be quite easy to tell the story about the precarity of rural Bihar by focusing on the daily struggles of the landless lower castes and women, given the continued vulnerability and violence both groups face. Instead I focus here on the experience of middle-aged men from the dominant castes. Upon first glance, well-established landowners were insulated from the most extreme forms of

hardship. Yet, from their perspective, the increasing capitalization of the rural sphere threatened their way of life. Moreover, they believe that the privileges they enjoyed brought the pressure of maintaining a certain standard of living. Looking at the experience of dominant landholders in the area thus demonstrates the extent to which prolonged economic underdevelopment and state neglect have allowed sensations of instability to seep into even the most privileged sectors of rural society.

Ethnographies of the informal sector in South Asian economies – the ones that explore an ethos of improvisation or resourcefulness – have tended to focus on urban actors, such as traders who have carved out profitable niches, or members of a dispossessed underclass (Chari 2004; Chatterjee 2004; Anjaria 2011). By contrast, scholars have devoted less attention to rural modes of survival. Similarly, anthropologists in recent years have focused attention on the urban middle-class in South Asia and its struggles (Fernandes 2006; Oza 2006). Yet the issues facing the rural middle-class are also worthy of attention, but have often been overlooked.

Raka Ray has drawn on the concept of precarity to describe the fraught experiences of middle-class women and men who travel from small towns to Bombay with the hopes of making it in the Hindi film industry (Ray 2014). Although many of them have achieved a measure of success, with apartments and cars and social networks in the industry, they were aware just how quickly what they have built might come undone. In the same vein, here I trace local responses of precarity by examining the prospects and embodied experiences of a group of people living above the official poverty line. They own land and enjoy many of the trappings of a secure existence, but their employment is nevertheless contingent and vulnerable to fluctuations of the market economy.

In writing about their struggles, however, I do not aim to advance an apology or requiem

for the fading fortunes of a landed, patriarchal class. Rather, I attend to their own narratives about their place in contemporary India and take their claims of instability as the starting point for theorizing rural precarity. In doing so, I do not insist on some objective assessment of their circumstances or preconceived definition of poverty. The challenge I face is how to write with empathy about their life projects and struggles, unpacking the ways that they understood their own circumstances. This was especially challenging but important for me considering that I did not often share their political perspective on gender, caste, and religion.

In the remainder of this chapter, I begin by drawing out the idiom of temporariness as it emerged in conversation with my neighbors about their own lives and prospects. I then reveal how this sense of precarity manifested itself in three distinct areas of life in Bihar. First, I examine efforts to find and maintain off-farm salaried employment. Second, I elucidate their struggles with the lack of the local water infrastructure in the effort to irrigate their crops. Third, I show how this sense of instability related to constructing the physical infrastructure and the ways they inhabit them. I conclude by considering how this sense of rural resourcefulness reframes the concept of *jugaad*, the much-celebrated innovative work-around that has commanded attention in urban India.

Local Articulations of Precarity

The sky had already grown dark and inky by the time Gopal returned to the village of Amalpur on a chilly November evening. Gopal, a 38-year-old father of three, worked as a sales representative for Thunderbolt, a national beer company. Each day he commuted to Bihar Sharif, the district headquarters, with his cousin, Rakesh, a representative for another beer company. In Bihar, beer and foreign liquor retailers purchase alcohol from wholesale representatives who

were stationed at the government depot, the Bihar State Beverages Corporation Ltd. Each day, Gopal, Rakesh, and their colleagues waited at the depot for the district's retailers to arrive and place their orders.

The 17-kilometer journey from Amalpur to Bihar Sharif took about an hour by motorcycle. In the foggy weeks at the end of the year, the sun shone weakly. The men wrapped thin shawls around their bodies, but the cold wind whipped at their necks on the ride home. Upon approaching his two-story brick house at the southern edge of the village that evening, Gopal slowed his motorcycle to a putter. He wheeled it into the house, parked it in the entryway, and washed his hands and feet at the hand pump in the courtyard. It was only after he milked the cow and washed up again that he took a seat on the wooden bench inside. His wife Rajnu Devi brought him a metal plate with a heap of rice and vegetables. The rice, cooked at lunchtime, had grown cold, while the vegetables were leftover from breakfast. At 5 PM, this made for a late lunch indeed, but it filled Gopal's growling stomach. While at work, at "*duty*" as he and his colleagues called it, he typically only had the time and money to snack on fruit or a *samosā* from a nearby street vendor.

Gopal lived in a joint family household that consisted of six adults – including himself, his younger brother Bhopal Kumar, their father Dinesh, and each of their wives – and five children between the ages of one and 11. Dinesh had a respected position at the local high school, having risen from schoolteacher to assistant headmaster. Although Gopal and Bhopal had each earned a BA at a local college, they had failed to find secure employment. So each day Gopal headed off to the city to do his "*duty*." As rural life in Bihar has become increasingly capitalized, Gopal's salary provided a vital source of cash to his household.

I sat with Gopal that evening as he ate his meal, and listened as he rehashed his day. It had been a successful one; he had sold more than 200 cases of beer. As Bihar's economy has accelerated, so has its thirst for beer and liquor. Yet Gopal and his colleagues were judged not only on hitting sales targets, but also increasing their market share. This meant he and his colleagues competed to win the business of the local retailers.

Whenever we spoke about his work, Gopal grew particularly animated as he dissected the ins-and-outs of "*marketing*," as he called it. During those cold evenings, he spent hours detailing for me how he sought to maintain his position and capture his competitors' business by wooing their customers. Many beer companies offered bonuses and prizes to entice retailers to stock their goods. In this competitive environment, he had grown adept in matching the incentives offered by rival companies.

It seemed to me he had an incisive understanding of the industry. So I asked him if he might like to be manager one day, and oversee sales representatives like himself in districts across Bihar.

"No, *sir*." Gopal shook his head. He defaulted to calling me "*sir*" whenever his awareness of the distance between us was heightened. "I'm a BA pass, with five years experience. I don't have a technical degree. It would be very hard to move up."

Gopal's statement reflected his awareness of the fact that succeeding in the formal Indian economy requires the right set of qualifications. Although he had developed a faculty for this work, he also knew that consumer tastes and the whims of management were fickle. There were rumors that his company might be acquired by a multinational. There was no telling what changes new management might institute. He was not thinking about advancing his career; he would be satisfied to keep his job.

“You’ve seen how Bhopal has struggled to find a place,” he continued, referring to his brother’s employment. As with many other men in the village with similar qualifications, Bhopal had not been able to find a salaried job in the service sector. “Understand this! This isn’t a *government job*. This is just temporary (*asthāyī*).”

Indeed, when I asked people in Amalpur what work they or their family members did, most invariably reply with the general category of employment – “*government job*” (*sarkārī naukārī*) versus “*private job*” – rather than with the specific job itself. This response reflected an assumption that the inquirer would inevitably be more interested in the permanence or temporariness of the employment, rather than precise nature of work itself.

While graduates in urban India often aspired to work with the most reputable multinational or conglomerate, in rural areas a government job remained the most coveted form of employment. Based on the salary, pension, and job security, the choice was clear. Young men tried for years to gain a position, repeatedly sitting for the government entrance examinations, usually without success. By contrast, a private job in rural Bihar provided much less security. Certainly, they valued the modest salary for its contribution to household expenses. But they feared they might lose their posting at any moment.

A conversation that I had with Rakesh around that time illustrated for me that descriptions of economic insecurity were not simply calculated performances but reflected the experience of living in an embattled, uncertain present. Rakesh was an affable 42 year-old man with two school-aged children. He was also the eldest of six siblings. When his father, a schoolteacher, died suddenly a few years earlier, he was unexpectedly thrust into the role of head of his family. Rakesh had a calm disposition and the weary look of a man upon whom much responsibility had settled at an early age.

One evening, I was struck by his response to an off-hand comment I had made over dinner. I had expressed sympathy with the people from Govindpur. These were lower-caste people, many of them landless, who worked as sharecroppers and day laborers for the farmers in Amalpur. Recalling an encounter with an impoverished and ailing woman, I observed, “Their lives are so hard.”

Rakesh scoffed. “It’s not so. Our lives are more difficult than theirs.”

I was puzzled. Was he really insisting that he and his neighbors, with their sturdy homes and fully stocked storerooms, their motorcycles and satellite dishes, had a more challenging life than their laborers who had none of those things? Clearly, he and I viewed the social terrain of the region completely differently.

“Have you met anyone there who doesn’t have enough to eat?” he asked me.

“No, I haven’t,” I conceded.

“No, you haven’t,” he repeated. “No one in Nalanda district is starving. There’s no shortage of rice or potatoes in this area.”

I frowned. Rakesh continued his oration.

Rakesh emphasized the differences between castes in the area. Given that no one here was starving, he cautioned that I must not allow myself to be misled by the outward signs of poverty in their clothes, homes, and sparse material possessions. Habit or custom could account for those things. The lower castes, he reiterated, had the freedom to live, dress, and eat in a simple manner. By contrast, he and his neighbors in Amalpur, as members of a more respectable upper-caste society, faced the pressure of meeting costly social obligations. Perhaps those in Govindpur had less, but their expenses were fewer as well.

“Our lives are more difficult than theirs,” he repeated. “All the laborer has to do is work,

drink, eat, and sleep. They don't have any other needs.”

When I pointed out that surely they needed to purchase food and medicine, Rakesh waved me off. There were various government programs to provide for BPL (Below Poverty Line) households. They received a monthly allotment of grain, a subsidized electric connection, and an ambulance to call in case of emergency. There were reserved spots for them in educational institutions and government posts. All this was due to their political sway in elections. From Rakesh's vantage point, APL (Above Poverty Line) households like his faced more difficult circumstances. It was a perspective that was widely shared among his neighbors.

“We have to struggle to maintain the joint household—to earn enough money, to educate our children. It's a daily struggle.” Like Gopal, Rakesh's income from his “*duty*” was essential in holding the joint family household together. They worried and argued about money constantly.

Rakesh's description naturalized the differences between rich and poor, upper caste and low caste. He offered a quasi-sociological perspective in which a person's needs, expectations, and desires were shaped largely by caste and class. In doing so, he suggested that these two communities, just one kilometer apart, diverged in their expectations and aspirations for their lives. While the history of caste relations in rural Bihar has produced differentiated social practices and understandings of how best to live, I found that when it came to people's aspirations, there were many more similarities than differences across these villages. Men and women in both villages were intent on providing a good education for their children, and giving them more opportunities than they had enjoyed.

At the heart of Rakesh's speech were the caste politics of resentment and a critique of the social terrain in the wake of the Mandal Commission. When the government began to implement its recommendations in the early 1990s, upper caste groups in Bihar erupted in violent protest

(cf. Dirks 2001). Their objections had only hardened by the time I arrived in Amalpur. The upper-caste residents bitterly complained that current system posed obstacles to their advancement. They alleged that unqualified applicants benefited from connections to politicians from their caste, or paid huge bribes to receive their postings.

Middle-aged upper-caste men from Amalpur maintained power and privilege in the area, but nevertheless considered themselves as members of a lost generation (cf. Allison 2013). Whereas once their fathers held postings and were recognized as educated and respectable men, they had failed to build on their success. They were caught between the accomplishments of their fathers and the aspirations of their sons, which, because they had a bit more money to invest in tuition classes, often seemed more viable. These men came of age at a particularly grim time in Bihar's history, and hoped their children would benefit in this era of improved governance and broadened opportunity. But the stakes were also heightened as the subdivision of ancestral lands across generations meant that these men were left with modest landholdings at the moment when the path to secure employment had become more difficult.

As old advantages eroded, upper-caste men struggled to maintain their social position (cf. Jeffrey 2010). Amalpur, home to some of the largest landholders in the immediate area, had long held sway over other villages, from which their laborers and tenants hailed. The Bhumihar farmers, though a numerical minority, controlled the majority of the land and capital. But over the past several decades, the politics of Bihar had shifted toward numerically superior middle castes, like Kurmis and Yadavs. Moreover, the migration of laborers out of the state reconfigured the balance of power between landowners and laborers, as I detailed in chapter 2.

The Bhumihars in Amalpur felt politically marginalized on every level of government. At the local level, the sarpanch, the elected leader of the panchayat, was a Dalit from neighboring

Salmanpur. During his term, he focused on delivering infrastructure improvements to other areas of his constituency rather than Amalpur, a comparatively well-off village. At the state level, there was the widespread belief that the ruling Janata Dal (United) and Chief Minister Nitish Kumar favored the interest of his fellow Kurmis, the most populous group in the district. At the national level, the Congress-led government was seen to favor the interests of minorities at the expense of Hindus. The Bhumihars tended to favor the Bharatiya Janata Party, a right-wing Hindu party that represented the interests of upper-caste groups in Bihar.

This was the social terrain that shaped Rakesh's outlook. These were the factors that Rakesh, Gopal, and many others in Amalpur blamed for their tenuous situation and their failure to find secure employment. It weighed on them heavily. What does it mean for a man to live with the knowledge that he is unlikely to measure up to his forbearers? How does he live, when the obligations and expectations he confronted exceeded his capacity and efforts? This was not merely an existential question. It was one with very practical and material dimensions. How did rural people manage, on a daily basis, to negotiate these vulnerabilities? To explore these questions, I now turn to the ways that rural people found and maintained off-farm employment.

Performing “Duty”

By 6 AM each morning, the village of Amalpur was awake with shouts and activity. While the women were indoors preparing breakfast, the men gathered in the lane, perching on a stoop, or leaning against a wall. Once they had milked their cows, and if there was no pressing agricultural work to tend to, this was the main social hour of the village. During the daytime, each man was busy with his own affairs—working in the fields, at a job in a nearby city, or traveling to the market for errands. So this was the ideal time for men to meet their friends and

neighbors. They also assembled later in the day—in the late afternoon, having returned from their various excursions and chores, and in the hour before dinner. But this early morning gathering was most lively and well-attended. Men arrived sipping on a metal cup of chai, or cradling a young child. They were informal gatherings, with neighbors constantly stopping by for a stretch and then just as casually drifting off for a tour of the village or a walk in the fields.

Much of the morning conversation involved sharing recent news about friends and relatives. Although there was certainly pleasure in meeting one's neighbors, there was a practical advantage in keeping up-to-date with the news. They often traded information about the latest prices and offerings in the market. Although each man was responsible for providing for his own family, they realized hard work or cleverness alone did not ensure survival. To socialize with one's neighbors, to be a sociable person (*sāmājīk ādmī*), as they put it, was essential for dealing with some of life's most complex tasks in rural Bihar—finding a job, securing a loan, or marrying off one's daughter.

Around 6:30 AM, these gatherings gained more focus. At this time of the morning, the newspaper deliveryman typically arrived in Amalpur, cycling through on his route to distribute papers to monthly subscribers. Gopal's household subscribed to the Hindi daily, *Dainik Bhaskar* (Rising Sun). They opted for this newspaper because it included the most current announcements of new postings for government jobs. Yet at Rs. 3 (US \$0.05) per day, or Rs. 90 (US \$1.50) per month, many households in the village considered a newspaper subscription too extravagant an expense. As Akhil Gupta observes, access to the informational economy in rural India is differentiated by caste and education background (Gupta 2012).

Thus Gopal's relatives and neighbors gathered around each morning to collectively read the newspaper. Often two or three men read the paper at a time, peering over a shoulder, or

passing around a section that one person had finished reading. Some lingered on the Biharsharif section, which reported the local news from around the district. Unemployed men, however, often flipped straight to the interior pages to study announcements for the latest competitions for government jobs in the railways, state police, or education department. Young men who had completed their secondary education or BA continued to study in private tuition centers in nearby towns and cities in order to perform well on the entrance exams. These programs required a substantial outlay of time and money, but given the attraction of a permanent position, they considered the investment worthwhile.

As they read the paper, the discussion frequently centered on the array of schemes brought forth by the central and state government. Usually announced by politicians and bureaucrats with some fanfare, these schemes promise benefits for farmers, Scheduled Castes, or other segments of the population. Yet the schemes were but a temporary substitute, stopgap measures that underscored the absence of comprehensive and durable improvements in the rural infrastructure. The men scrutinized each announcement as to their own eligibility. People constantly discussed these opportunities, and relayed news of them to others in the village. From their perspective, what united these schemes is their time-delimited window, the ambiguous or contested information about the parameters, and the sudden rush to avail oneself of the benefits.

Increasingly, private companies have also adopted the language and logic of schemes. This was perhaps most prominent in the competition between mobile service providers offering new plans for phone minutes. In recent years, as connectivity outside of cities and towns has improved, mobile phones have become an important part of their social and economic life in rural Bihar. With the rise in travel to other states and data packages, these schemes have proliferated in complexity. Some men in the village realized that they could exploit these

schemes so that they could obtain cheap mobile phone service by signing on for the latest plan. As a result, they often accumulated several SIM cards as they adopted a new mobile service provider heralding the latest offer. There was little stability or brand loyalty as people switched to avail themselves of the most favorable deal.

As Kajri Jain argues, the Indian bazaar has its own logic that hinges on personal connections and networks of reciprocity (Jain 2007). More to the point, Sharad Chari has demonstrated how Gounders in Tamil Nadu drew on caste solidarity in transforming themselves from a caste with humble agrarian origins to a dominant force in the urban manufacturing industry (Chari 2004). In rural Bihar, too, caste and village-based connections shaped people's sense of the work opportunities available to them. Gopal was the first man from Amalpur to find work as a salesman at the depot, having learned about the opening from a school acquaintance. Since joining five years ago, Gopal was able to arrange posts with different companies for Rakesh, another cousin, and a close neighbor. The salary of Rs. 6,000 (US \$100) was roughly in line with other private jobs in the service sector in the area. The greatest challenge was keeping up with the demands of their superiors. During my fieldwork, the other two men, Gopal's cousin and neighbor, both lost their positions at the depot because they had repeatedly failed to meet their monthly target. The neighbor was eventually allowed to return after spending a few months at home, an episode that underscored the insecurity and transience of the job, which was nevertheless desirable because it provided a cash income.

Indeed if salesmen like Gopal depended on their personal networks simply to find a position, they were forced to demonstrate similar resourcefulness to hang on to the job. In this everyday hustle to defend one's customers and attract new ones, "*duty*" emerges as something less reliable and more precarious. Gopal's boss in Patna constantly hounded him about his sales

numbers, phoning early in the morning and late in the evening. Urgent SMS messages accumulated on his phone, buzzing one after the next.

Along with the pressure of meeting the sales targets, the work entailed bodily hazards as well. The men departed for the city after breakfast, but had no time for a proper meal until returning home in the late afternoon. They then ate a cold lunch that the rest of the family had consumed hours earlier. They deemed it infeasible to bring a packed tiffin lunch with them: They needed to set off for work before their wives had finished making the rice, and they did not deem it appropriate to disrupt their routine. Besides, it would have been awkward to sit down to a full meal in front of a dozen hungry colleagues. So they subsisted on snacks and fruit until they made it home. Upon their safe return, they sometimes commented on the gruesome accidents they witnessed on the roadways during their commute, thankful to have avoided that fate for at least another day.

Although the government fixed the price of alcohol, private corporations attracted retailers to stock their brands by offering them prizes if they reached a certain threshold. For instance, a prize for purchasing several thousand cases might be a new motorcycle. The salesmen were often authorized by their bosses to match the enticements offered by his competitors. Given the competition and its consequences, the arrival of each retailer at the depot set off a scramble for his attention. Whenever a retailer pulled up on his motorcycle, the representatives from the different companies leapt from their seats on the wooden benches positioned at the entryway to the depot, elbowing each other out the way. The retailer, seeing this scrum, was in the position to request small favors and gifts from the salesmen, such as ordering chai or offering snacks. One evening, Rakesh complained that a potential customer suggested that he purchase some sweets. Rakesh was forced to pay out-of-pocket for a box of sweets, and grew silently infuriated as the

man distributed sweets to those assembled, and did not even bother to eat one himself. Taken together, these obligations show the way that the work extended well past the time spent at the depot.

But the competitions led to a big payoff for the representatives at the depot who knew how to handle them. Gopal explained to me that some of his colleagues, the ones who lived in the city and dressed in a flashy manner, had devised tricks where they manipulated the prizes, either by collaborating with their customers, or by raising the price and pocketing the difference.

“Aren’t they afraid of getting arrested?” I asked.

Gopal waved his hand dismissively. “Sometimes people get fired for this sort of thing. But you don’t go to jail for stealing 15,000 rupees (US \$250).”

I was not so sure about this, but these were well-connected men.

And to find and keep a private job like this one rested both on a man’s personal connections and his ability to navigate the jealous world of the depot. Such maneuvers were a part of life as a salesman. But while Gopal reveled in a little friendly competition, he has no interest in engaging in more complicated schemes. He was content to sell the beer at the list price, and draw his salary.

Agricultural Arrangements

Though an increasing number of village men expected to provide for their families with off-farm work, Nalanda district remained an agricultural region, and almost all households in the village engaged in agricultural labor. Rural people’s resourcefulness in the off-farm labor market had its roots in the farming practices of the region. Their experience of making do given the gaps in the agricultural infrastructure informed their engagements in other areas of economic life.

Much of the scholarship on rural India focuses on the structural causes of chronic underdevelopment in the rural sphere. In writing about the crisis facing Indian agriculture, A. R. Vasavi emphasizes the continued production of vulnerability that result from gaps in the public infrastructure (Vasavi 2012). However she argues that locally dominant castes have often avoided this sense of marginality by consolidating their agricultural gains (Vasavi 2012, 47-53). While some Bhumihars in Bihar certainly found success in converting their control of land into lasting economic advantages through education and investments in land and businesses, many viewed their prospects beyond the village as increasingly tenuous. Vasavi's account prompts ethnographic attention to the ways that rural people manage to provide for their families at a moment of state neglect. Here I trace how farmers reacted to these shortfalls in public investment by cultivating an ethos of improvisation. This habitus, I argue, was concretized in the very materiality of agricultural activity.

Consider the pump set. To grow paddy in this area of Bihar, three rounds of irrigation are necessary. Yet the countryside is littered with defunct government tube wells. For instance, the one closest to my house in the village was built in the 1960s, but has sat broken and ignored for more than two decades. With neither functioning tube wells nor regular electricity to power them, the most ever-present tool for agriculture in rural Bihar, and perhaps its emblem, was the diesel engine pump set.

With this indispensable device, farmers pumped surface water into their paddy fields from the rivers, streams, and channels that bisected the alluvial plain. Most farmers owned a pump set, and those who did not often hired one from a neighbor. On morning walks out to the fields, farmers monitored the progress of their crops, checking the soil moisture. When the soil became dry, and rain was not in the forecast, farmers opted to irrigate.

After setting up the pump to siphon nearby surface water, several hours were required to flood the fields. Because landholdings were dispersed among multiple non-contiguous plots, it often took several days to complete a single round of irrigation. These rounds were typically spaced a few weeks apart. In this enterprise, precision was less a question of volume but rather of timing—knowing the right moment to irrigate. In place of knowledge about the local flora, it was technical know-how and trouble-shooting – the ability to repair or coax recalcitrant machines back to life – that were the most valued skills in agriculture. The Green Revolution farmer, in this sense, was primarily a technician.

The pump set was bulky, smelly, greasy, and loud. For farmers, the most arduous task was simply lugging the machine out to the fields. Along with the device itself, they required a canister of diesel, a roll of plastic “layflat” irrigation discharge hose (*pītar*), and a length of twine. This was too much equipment for one man to haul by himself. The ability to mobilize assistance from laborers or kin was vital. Moreover, because their fields were largely inaccessible by vehicle, farmers used innovative methods to transport the pump set. Some farmers hauled the machine by strapping it to a bicycle rack, or tugging it behind them on a small trolley. Others lashed it between a pair of stout bamboo poles, with two men holding them between them. In all cases, simply moving the machine from place to place required taxing labor.

Once a farmer arrived in the fields, arranging the pump set required further adjustments and improvisations. The farmer had to find sturdy ground upon which to place the machine, a location that provided access to both the water source and the plot to be irrigated. Because many of the channels and streams ran along one side of the road, the surface water and the target field were often located on opposite sides of a road. The only way to cross this barrier was to lay the plastic irrigation hose across the road. Yet when the hose filled with water, it presented a hazard

to vehicular traffic, especially to the heavily loaded carts and trucks that regularly traversed these narrow country roads. In order to avert disaster, farmers built a makeshift speed bump of dirt and bundles of chaff so to allow both traffic and water to flow. Whenever I was out walking with Munna and we crossed one of these reinforced speed-bumps, he pointed out this example of “*deśī technology*.”

The state government annually reimbursed farmers for their purchase of diesel fuel and fertilizers. Yet farmers reported that these schemes were insufficient for their expenditures and often beset with corruption. They pointed out that sometimes this subsidy was not available at all, for unexplained reasons. When the government did announce the reimbursement, hundreds of farmers lined up in a snaking queue outside the block office to present their receipts and receive their money. It took hours to receive their payment. Those that did not receive the money on the first day had to return again on the subsequent days. They complained that it was a waste of an entire week, but there was little they could do about it. Life in precarious Bihar often entailed spending vast amounts of time pursuing any avenue for advancement.

While a scheme on one level represented a plan, the antithesis of improvisation, in reality the inconsistent delivery of these programs nevertheless compelled farmers to devise solutions on the fly. When the government suddenly announced that they were distributing fertilizer to farmers in the district headquarters, and not at the local block office, farmers dropped everything to rush to the site while supplies lasted. Then they had to arrange with a rickshaw driver from the village to arrange to transport the bulky bundles. In the absence of a well-maintained agricultural infrastructure, farmers were most often left to figure out the solution to their irrigation problems on their own.

Building a House

Just as farmers economic and farming practices required acts of creativity and resourcefulness in the face of precarious conditions, so too did constructing and maintaining a house in the village. One October day, I sat with my neighbor, Ashok Kumar, on a bench at the entrance to the village. Ashok was a rotund, jocular man in his 40s. The village, sleepy during the day, was undergoing its late afternoon revival: men returned by foot from the main road, having completed their work or errands in nearby towns; children went to and from the tuition center, schoolbooks in hand; trucks rumbled past, headed to still more distant villages. Ashok and I chatted for a while, then fell silent, watching the flow of traffic.

“My closest friends from the village have left,” he announced, half to me, and half to no one in particular. “They’ve gone out to work, to different places in Bihar or Jharkhand. I meet others in the village, but it’s not the same.” Until this point, Ashok had struck me as a gregarious fellow, even feisty; I had not glimpsed this melancholy simmering within him.

Like most men in Amalpur, Ashok was an underemployed farmer. Many farmers from the village a generation or two earlier converted their advantages into secure employment in the civil service. Ashok’s father, for instance, had been an official in the state revenue department. Ashok, on the other hand, had a graduated with a BA from a local college, but had managed to find only a series of private jobs. For several years he ran a pharmacy in a nearby town that was connected with the practice of a local doctor. When that closed, he returned to the village. These days, he managed the local dairy cooperative, drawing a nominal salary.

Gesturing in the direction of his house, Ashok grew wistful. “I often think about my parents. If I sit alone there, how could their memory not come to me? That’s why I came to sit with you here.” He fell silent, then continued. “My father built that house (*ghar*). But what have

I been able to do to add onto it?” Ashok’s inconsistent employment history had hampered his ability to build his own legacy. His house was a spacious, thickly built compound on a narrow cobbled lane, just off the road, bordered on all sides by those of his relatives. But inside, the house was in disarray. Building materials and farming implements sat piled in corners.

The sense of a house as unfinished and permanently under construction was commonplace in Amalpur. Men viewed their house as life project, as an integral part of their legacy. Beyond its symbolism, I underscore the ways that they conceived of the physical structure of the house as a fungible thing. The house was vital for protecting the family from harm and illness, and their possessions from theft and ruin. Yet even in all its solidity, the house was also a work in progress. Its owners understood the current form understood to be temporary, a material to improve upon incrementally over time. The house had a life cycle of its own and went through many stages. It was a structure produced through years of labor, even a lifetime. But the construction and renovation of the house exceeded the trajectory of a single life. Indeed it was situated in a larger family story as people reconfigured structures built years ago to suit the needs of the current generation.

On occasion, people knocked down the house that they had inherited and renovated them for their own purposes. But rather than discarding the debris and starting with a clean state, they often repurposed the bricks that had composed the walls. They excised the old bricks from the crumbling plaster and mortar, and then chiseled them into a rectangular form. They were then rearranged into a new wall. As brick houses have become more prevalent, people also repurposed old mud brick (*mittī*) structures as cowsheds or storerooms. This practice suggests that, however solid and imposing a house may be, people viewed it as a source of materials and as an object for improvisation.

For example, Gopal's house was once a part of one large family compound headed by their grandfather. During their childhood, Gopal and his brother Bhopal had grown up in a joint family household with Rakesh, Munna, and their siblings, and other cousins. As they grew to adulthood, married, and started their own families, their fathers realized that they needed more space. Relations between different parts of the family would be warmer, they reckoned, because separation reduced the possibility for conflict. Yet the process of dividing up inherited property was often the greatest source of tension in rural Bihar. On occasion, it resulted in long-running feuds and bitter lawsuits. In the case of Gopal, Rakesh, and the rest of their cousins, they subdivided the house and farmland without much lingering resentment.

Despite the fact that they now inhabited their own homes, the family's everyday lives remained entangled. The old structure and property had been carved up in such a way that the cousins, now neighbors, share walls, electricity wires, and farming equipment. Throughout the day, the women carried on an ongoing conversation with each other from their respective rooftops. More intrusively, from their rooftops and windows they could easily gaze into each other's courtyards and observe the rhythms of everyday life—raising children, cooking food, entertaining guests. While they valued this closeness, it was also a source of occasional tension.

Finishing construction on the house was a major goal for many residents of Amalpur. Just next door to Gopal's house was the house of his father's first cousin, Madhur, a middle-aged farmer. One morning, Madhur walked across the village, and arranged with two landless laborers – an uncle and his nephew – to assist with some work on his house. The two picked up sledgehammers and, with alternating swings, began to demolish the brick facade of Madhur's house. Within a few hours, they had removed a rectangular area approximately one meter by one meter in size. By the next evening, Madhur was reclining in his *dalān*, the multi-functional

entryway and sitting room used by men to receive guests. He sat there drinking chai with a friend, enjoying the breeze and view of the street through his newly installed window.

After he installed the ground-floor window, Madhur embarked on a series of other projects to upgrade the house. During the months I lived in Amalpur, he reinforced the interior staircase, and dug up the floor so to lay new pipe leading to the latrine. He replastered the front façade of his house, climbing to the roof each evening to rinse the surface with buckets of water, so as to improve its durability. At the time of my departure, there were several more projects lined up.

Each home improvement project depended on having enough cash to purchase materials and pay laborers. People often cited a lack of capital as the main hindrance to progress. As a result many homes in the village seemed to be under permanent construction. Staircases soared into the air without railings. Designated kitchen spaces were just a concrete shell, so people cooked on the rooftop instead. People climbed bamboo ladders to the roof, as no other option had been created. Stacks of bricks piled up in front of houses, waiting to be put to use. They stood there for months, a testament to future plans, and unfulfilled dreams.

Unlike hulking blocks of flats erected in Patna, rural Biharis largely relied on their own skills in building a house. They considered it unnecessary to hire an engineer or an architect. That was something for city-dwellers with more complicated projects. Instead, they served as their own designer and contractor for these projects—drawing up the plans themselves, purchasing the bricks, sand, and concrete from local vendors, and contracting laborers. When it came to technical tasks, such as building load-bearing walls and installing roofs, they hired skilled masons and laborers from nearby villages who had extensive knowledge of such things.

In addition to constructing and repairing their houses, residents of Amalpur also

frequently repaired the village infrastructure themselves in the absence of government intervention. For instance, in the days leading up to Deepawali and Holi, men spent the mornings unclogging the drainage ditches that run through the village. Similarly, hampered by poor electrical connectivity for several days, Gopal and his relatives combined their resources to purchase a new electrical wire. They then spent an afternoon perched on ledges hanging from the branches of trees as they reconnected their houses to the government transformer. They installed the wire by drawing on their own know-how and recruiting the help of handy neighbors. These actions reflected a recognition of what the state could not or would not do. It showed necessity of making temporary, incremental improvements in the surrounding environment on one's own.

Conclusion

In recent years, given global attention to India's growing economy, a number of commentators have valorized the concept of *jugaad* as the canny spirit driving urban India's dramatic rise. *Jugaad* (properly transliterated as *jugār*), a slang Hindi term that connotes creative solutions cobbled together from makeshift resources, has been heralded as a principle of innovation that can create value for businesses the world over (cf. Birtchnell 2011; Radjou et al. 2012; Ashoka 2014). Making such claims, of course, occludes and even naturalizes the structural forces that make it necessary for some people to fashion a livelihood out of spare parts.

Meanwhile, Beatrice Jauregui draws on the widespread evocation of *jugaad* as a means of rethinking a rigid distinction between corruption and virtuous behavior (Jauregui 2014). Indeed "etting by" in rural Bihar often demanded maneuvers that were technically illicit, such as obtaining multiple allotments of a fertilizer subsidy. People in the village justified this behavior because officials in the government were undoubtedly doing the same. *Jugaad* was a quality of

agency – Jauregui describes it as a form of “provisional agency” – but also a quality of attention (Jauregui 2014). It was a disposition that entailed gathering information, noticing opportunities, and being ready to respond to changing circumstances.

While the conditions that necessitated improvisation and workarounds were certainly present in rural areas, I did not encounter many people who used the idiom of *jugaad*. Instead my neighbors spoke about their temporary situations (*asthāyī sthiti*) and joked about deploying *deśī technology*. In collecting these stories about “*deśī technology*” and resourcefulness, I do not present them as a prehistory to *jugaad*, to the golden age of urban innovation in neoliberal India. Rather, they are the materialized responses that have persisted on the rural side of the divide, in marginalized spaces. Perhaps one difference between instances of *jugaad* in urban areas and the creative workarounds I witnessed in rural Bihar is that *jugaad* seemed to contain the possibility of progress or profit, turning *jugaad* solutions into a business opportunity. On the other hand, my neighbors framed their actions as a necessary means of survival in a place of state neglect.

Chapter 4

Intimate Rivals: Women's Labor in the Joint Family Household

“We spend half our lives making food,” Arati complained.

Arati sat off to one side of the hearth (*cūlhā*) as Krishna Devi crouched before it, stirring a pot. The mixture of milk and sugar, the base of a special sweet dish, needed to be stirred for hours, so mother and daughter took turns. But as the afternoon dragged on, their energy began to flag, given the heat of the stove and ongoing exertion of their task.

“No, Arati,” Krishna Devi corrected her. “We spend our whole life making food!”

Roanne had spent the day with them, sitting in the rooftop kitchen as they worked. She related this exchange to me later that evening. It struck me as a fitting summation of their different perspectives. As rural women in Bihar, they were expected to take up the majority of the domestic labor in the household.

Arati, 26 years old, was on the cusp of a major transition. In the weeks to come she was set to return to her in-laws' house (*sasusāl*) in the next district. She was anxious about the labor that, as a daughter-in-law (*bahū*), she would be expected to undertake in her new environment. In Amalpur, her natal village (*māykā*), by contrast, she had much more freedom. She helped with the household tasks some of the time, but also spent time grooming herself, in worship, and visiting with friends in nearby houses. Her daily activities reflected the liminal space she inhabited. The rest of the family understood that they had fewer claims on her. She more properly belonged to another village.

Krishna Devi, on the other hand, had lived for more than four decades in Amalpur, her husband's village. When she first arrived as a young bride, she labored under the constant

surveillance of her mother-in-law (*sās*). But over the subsequent years, her role had gradually shifted. She had six children. She was widowed. Her husband had passed away unexpectedly six years earlier, from a heart attack shortly after his retirement as a teacher in a government school. But her children were very loyal to her. Her son Rakesh was the head of their patrilocal household, but she was the matron, the central figure.

The one constant in her life, through almost every single day since she came to Amalpur, was housework. This meant preparing three hot meals for the eight people who lived in the house. In this effort, she had the assistance of her daughter-in-law Rima, Rakesh's wife. Whereas another mother-in-law might have treated the arrival of a daughter-in-law as a sort of phased retirement, Krishna Devi had kept working at a steady pace. The family was too large – and perceived themselves to be too poor – to do anything else. Perhaps it was just her industrious nature, or her understanding of her position as a widow. Whatever the case, Krishna Devi's gentle rejoinder to her daughter seemed appropriate to me. She really had spent a lifetime engaged in the work of slicing, sifting, and stirring. Arati, on the other hand, was just starting out.

Krishna Devi had five adult sons, but only two of them had married. Rakesh, the eldest at 42, had a private job in the district capital—a story I relate in chapter 3. The second eldest brother, Rajesh, worked as a labor contractor in Delhi. His wife Pooja Devi lived with him there, so she was not available to help out in the joint family household in Bihar. Krishna Devi's third and fourth eldest sons, Ramesh and Krishan Kant, were unemployed, and busied themselves with farming and household chores. (I discuss Krishan Kant's struggles to find a salaried job in more depth in chapter 5.) Their unemployment hampered their marriage prospects. Fathers looking for a match for their daughters sought men who were earning an income, preferably with a

government job. Meanwhile, the youngest brother, Ravi, studied engineering in a college in Patna. He was occupied with his studies, and the family did not consider him ready for marriage until he had completed them. As a result, they were not able to bring in another daughter-in-law to support Rima in providing for the family.

Aside from Krishna Devi's pension, which was due to her based on her late husband's government position, Rakesh felt the strain of earning the only salary in the household. Nevertheless, he emphasized the benefits of living together as the joint family. "If someone is unemployed, then their life can still go on. If there's any trouble or poor health in the family, or any special circumstances, then who will provide help? We will. When I go for my *duty* each day, my brother can bring the feed for the cow, or take the rice to the mill. In her old age, Ma doesn't have to work from morning to night making food. If we each lived apart, we wouldn't be able to take care of her. She makes sure that everyone is behaving properly." Rakesh painted a portrait of mutual cooperation and support, especially at times of need. It echoes the attitudes expressed in Susan Wadley's "One Straw from a Broom Cannot Sweep," in which the titular adage encapsulates a belief in the strength of the joint family household as an economic unit (Wadley 2002). What Rakesh did not explicitly say, however, was that if the brothers were to decide to split apart and divide their land, they would each be left with just a small parcel of land. This was the gradual dispossession that I detail in chapter 2. It was not lost on them that their proud family was perhaps just a generation away from penury.

The married women in this family, as Bhumihars women, remained separated in the house, removed from public. Rima did not leave the house unaccompanied, and even then only on special occasions. Well-defined rules governed not only women's movements, but also dictated modesty in their dress, eating habits, and interactions with other family members. Like

others in Amalpur, Rakesh's family understood these restrictions as a form of care—providing for women so that they would not be compelled to leave the house to earn money. Such rules demonstrated their respectability, their capacity to shield women from the dirtiness and danger of the bazaar. As Angela Garcia and Lisa Stevenson note, care is not simply about forming and sustaining positive ties, but also includes coercive elements and even moments of violence (Garcia 2010; Stevenson 2014).

One afternoon, I observed that women from lower-caste backgrounds did manual labor on the family's farm. Krishna Devi was withering in her opinion, "Well, I'd rather die of starvation!" Her objection was not to physical labor per se. She'd known her share of that. Instead, the inability to provide for the family to the extent that the women needed to search for work represented a social death, a public humiliation. At its core, these practices were about safeguarding a woman's reputation and honor, and by extension that of her entire family's.

In this chapter, I trace the dynamics between women within a single joint family household as they unfolded over the course of several months. I focus on the relationship between three women in the family—Krishna Devi and her daughters-in-law Rima and Pooja. Their exchanges reveal Krishna Devi's anxiety about keeping the joint family household together in the face of economic pressure. The two younger women, meanwhile, struggled to define their own role and find a sense of belonging within the shifting alliances of the larger family. This was a question of what it meant to be a good woman – a good wife, a good mother, a good member of the larger family – how to define appropriate comportment, and the transgression of those bounds.

These questions about ideal womanhood and the relationship between mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws are enduring themes in studies of kinship and domestic life in South Asia

(cf. Trawick 1990; Visweswaran 1994; Cohen 1998; Vera-Sanso 1999; Lamb 2000; Gold and Gujar 2002; Donner 2008). This literature has elucidated the agonistic drama between women over power and control within the family (Wadley 1994; Cohen 1998; Vera-Sanso 1999; Pinto 2008; Singh 2011). Some scholars have looked at the production of the ideal norms of Indian womanhood, and particularly Hindu womanhood at particular social and political moments (Mankekar 1999; Sarkar 2001; Donner 2008). Others have unpacked *sevā* (service or care) as a central concept animating relations in the family (Lamb 2000; Kowalski 2016). One aspect of this literature concerns the ways that young married women struggle to conform to the patriarchal household, and the way these conflicts manifest themselves on the bodies of young women as somatic disorders (Clark-Decés 2000; Pinto 2014).

To this ongoing conversation about gender and family life in India, I contribute two arguments. First, I demonstrate the repercussions of broad economic pressures in Bihar – specifically, men’s chronic unemployment, and migration beyond the village – on the way that women’s labor and relationships were organized within the domestic sphere of the household. In particular, new sources of capital and power disrupted the established hierarchy between a mother-in-law and her daughters-in-law, in which the youngest daughter-in-law was expected to take the lead in preparing food (Camerini and Gill 1988; Vera-Sanso 1999). But women who challenged these norms often found themselves accused of undermining the solidarity of the household.

Second, this ethnography provides the grounds for thinking about how women enact an ethics of care through food. Cooking, feeding, and eating were the central activities of their daily life. Eating well was about more than just calories and nutrients, or having sufficient food and money. In rural Bihar, eating well was about feeding and being fed, consuming in the context of

the loving environment. Despite the strictures of the Indian family, the questions of whose responsibility it was to feed, or who deserved to be fed by whom, were not settled but actively up for debate. Food was thus the material through which women read their status and treatment within the family, and the way they advanced their claims on one another. Women's food practices elucidated the conflict between caring for the self, especially at a time when their bodies reflected the toll of their labor, and their duty to care for others.

In unpacking the fluctuating solidarities and conflicts within this household, I draw on many of the insights of my wife, Roanne. She spent many hours with these women, listening to their stories, frustrations, and aspirations. Roanne's presence in the village also enabled me to form stronger bonds with the women, particularly Rima. During my first few months in Amalpur, Rima seemed uninterested in my presence in her home. By contrast, most men and women I met were eager to query me on all manner of subjects. This all changed when Roanne arrived, four months into my stay. Roanne joined Rima for much of the time when Rima would otherwise be working alone. Even after Roanne returned to the U.S., Rima's attitude toward me changed. She began to see me as an extension of my wife—a sympathetic ally, perhaps. In a family where people felt an intense connection to their natal village, we were both outsiders. Without anyone else to talk to, Rima often expressed her feelings to me. It was, of course, the bond between Roanne and Rima that made it possible to gain this insight into her experiences. Their connection suggested the possibilities of feminine solidarity within a patriarchal space among women who occupied different positions of privilege, a type of connection that had largely been denied to Rima by the other women in the household.

Throughout this chapter, I examine how these women understood their role and negotiated their obligations to each other. In particular, I underscore the ways that the women's

food practices were both a site of struggle and also a medium through which they expressed their expectations. I focus on these practices to show enactments of care and the conflicts that resulted. To do so, first, I describe Rima's daily routine, with attention to the embodied qualities of her labor. Next, I relate the extended visit that Pooja, Krishna Devi's other daughter-in-law, and her family made to Amalpur from Delhi. Finally, I unpack the tensions that arose between Krishna Devi, Rima, and Pooja over their responsibilities in the household. I close with a discussion of ethics on two planes—the ethics of my writing this story, and how these women conceptualized and enacted their own ethics of care in this setting.

Rima

In the dim, gauzy light of the early morning, sometime before 5 AM, I woke to the sound of a wet broom brushing against the concrete floor. For a while I lay there, thinking about the sleep that had escaped me, listening to the rhythmic scraping of the broom. From the next room, though all I could see was a bit of light spilling in through the space beneath the wooden doors, I could picture Rima at work. I had watched her complete this task many times. Gathering the hem of her tan and brown sari in one hand she swept, her back bent at a thirty-degree angle to the ground. Shuffling her way counterclockwise around the edges of the courtyard. Her progress interrupted, perhaps, to pick up a stray sandal, or a forgotten plate. A couple light taps of the hand pump, just enough to fill the metal bucket a third of the way. She poured the water over a stretch of concrete, and swept the debris of dirt and food into the sunken basin, and then toward the drain.

Rima woke earliest in the family, and began working while the rest were still sleeping, or at least trying to. That was what they expected of Rima, and what she expected of herself. It seemed that the distinction between the two was blurred long ago.

Rima was 32 years old. She had married Rakesh when she was just 16, and had lived almost half her life in her *sasusāl*. She was a thin woman, to the point that people remarked on her appearance. They made these comments while she was working, often within earshot. She never responded or even seemed to hear. She was particularly quiet and industrious in that way, noticeably more so than other married women in the village. But while unusually reserved in nature, Rima's work routine was typical. Whenever I happened to be up at that early hour, I heard similar muffled sounds coming from other houses in the village. Married women's days began before dawn. That's what rural life demanded.

After a morning cup of chai, she turned her attention to breakfast. It took several hours to prepare; if she started at 6 or 7 AM, it might only be ready by 10 AM. While Rakesh, Krishan Kant, and Arati sat on the bench, enjoying their cups, Rima fetched some potatoes from under the bed in Krishna Devi's room. She set up against the wall on the southern side of the courtyard where the light was good at that hour; it was her favored spot for such work. Squatting or sitting on a small wooden board (*pirā*), she used a blade mounted vertically in a block of wood to peel the vegetables, expertly slicing as she guided the vegetables toward her.

Once the vegetables had been peeled and chopped, Rima went upstairs to cook the *sabzī* and make the *rotīs*. The earthen stove was located in the open-air kitchen on the roof. Like many women in the village, she cooked over an earthen stove fueled by *goīṭha*, the dried patties made of cow dung (*gobar*) mixed with wood shavings as fuel. This stove had space for two pots, and a large opening in the front to insert the fuel for the fire. Latika Devi, a lower-caste woman

from the other side of the village, came to the house a couple of times a week to prepare these cakes. She mixed the dung and wood together, and applied it to the brick wall on the side of the *gaushālā* (cow shed) to dry. Once they were ready, she piled them in a basket and set it next to the *cūlhā*, taking a quarter share as payment in kind for her labor.

Rima spent large chunks of the morning and evening each day in front of the stove. She had developed the skill of handling the fuel and cooking with it. One problem with *goīṭha* as fuel was that she needed to tend to the fire to keep it burning evenly. This was particularly tricky when, due to poor weather, the *goīṭha* was not completely dry. At times of shortages, she also added wood and sticks as kindling, some of which was hard to maneuver or did not fit inside the *cūlhā* easily. She was also given the chaff from paddy or wheat grain (*bhūsā*, or *bicālī* in Magahi) to use as fuel. All this organic matter burned dirty, especially when it was damp. The wall in front of her was blackened by soot. Even though it was an open-air space with a good cross breeze, steam poured off the stove, and the room often filled with smoke.

The family also owned a gas-powered stove, fueled by liquefied petroleum gas (LPG). It was located on a built-in countertop in one corner of the courtyard. But because the cylinders were costly and their allotment did not account for their large family's needs, they used it sparingly to cook full meals. Instead its main purpose was to thermize milk immediately after it had been taken from the cow, making it safe for household consumption, and to boil milk and tea leaves together to make chai. They favored the stove for these tasks because it was much more efficient, and its location in the courtyard meant they could attend to it while doing other things. They cooked on the stove when completing particularly intensive preparations, or as a backup if their supply of *goīṭha* had run low, or had not dried completely due to rain.

While Rima worked upstairs, the rest of the family remained downstairs, either doing chores or relaxing by watching TV. Ramesh, for instance, was busy each morning with *gau sevā* (care of the cow). He milked the cow as soon as he woke, not long after Rima, shivering with the early morning chill. Then he swept out the *gaushālā* and set aside the cow dung. He then cut chaff and fresh grass for the cow to eat. During this time, Krishna Devi was also occupied with housework and childcare: preparing vegetables for lunch, grinding lentils, and making sure the children were clothed and fed.

After Rima's husband and her children had dressed, bathed, eaten, and then headed off to work and school, Rima typically did not break for her own breakfast. Instead she was hard at work, preparing the rice and lentils that comprised the family's lunch. Then she set about cleaning the courtyard, washing the floor again and sweeping it thoroughly. After that was finished, she took up the daily washing, vigorously scrubbing the clothing of her family. As wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, she was responsible not only for own clothes, but for Rakesh's, her two children, and sometimes Krishna Devi's as well.

It was only after these chores were finished that she had the opportunity bathe and take her first meal of the day, aside from the morning cup of chai. She kept this demanding routine in part because Biharis considered it unclean to eat before bathing and conducting *pūjā* (worship). And they thought there was no point bathing before all the housework has been completed. It was often well past noon by this time. The breakfast foods had gone cold, but she did not bother to reheat them. To do so would waste fuel unnecessarily.

As a daughter-in-law, modesty was an important concept that guided not only when and how much she ate, but also in what context. Instead of eating with or in front of the family (and particularly in front of Krishna Devi, her mother-in-law), Rima usually crouched behind a pillar

so that Krishna Devi and the others would not see her take part in the impure act of eating. Many women, when asked to relate what and when they eat, obscured the specifics. I commonly heard women in Amalpur obfuscate by describing themselves as taking the *roti* meal (breakfast) and the rice meal (lunch) together, and then not eat another meal until late at night. Rima often ate just twice a day, with chai consumed first thing in the morning and again in the late afternoon.

In this sense, Rima's experience reflects changing norms around meals in rural India. Historically, many people ate just two full meals each day—a late morning meal and a late evening meal, with chai taken in between. Laboring people, the elderly, and many women, including Rima, still adhered to this schedule. But because of the rising prominence of the midday meal program at school and the lunch break in office jobs, many rural people in Amalpur had begun eating three meals a day. This shows the ways that age, gender, and class all influenced expectations about when and how often a person was to eat.

Whenever she thought of food, she first directed attention toward her family. I was sitting in the courtyard one day at lunchtime when I witnessed an exchange that illustrated how Rima put her family's needs before her own.

"Come eat, my son!" Rima called out to Rishu that day, in the midst of completing her washing. She had set down a plate of rice and curried peas on the bench. Rishu, laying on the ground across the room, engrossed in a toy, did not respond. After a moment, she called to him again. "Eat this food, Rishu! Come here, my son!" As I noted at the beginning of chapter 2, the care of Rishu, her eight-year-old son, was a particular concern in the family. He was a slight, sensitive boy, and he often needed to be chided several times to stop playing and eat his meal.

After another round of prodding, Rishu went over and sat at the bench, with the plate before him.

Rima returned to her chores. She sat crouched over a bucket in the courtyard, scrubbing the family's clothes, efficiently rubbing the fabric back and forth quickly between her hands. With the clothes soaking inside the sudsy bucket, she began to wash the floors.

Rishu, unenthused, had only picked at a few of the peas. After five minutes, the plate remained largely untouched. All the while, Rima watched him out of the corner of her eye, concerned. Then she stood up from her washing, and quickly rinsing her hands at the hand pump, came to the bench, and took her son in her arms. Scooping up the rice and peas with her right hand, mixing them together, she began inserting the food into his mouth. One bite. Then the next. Then the next. She herself had not eaten yet.

But this was what was required, on this particular day, to feed her son. She continued like that, patiently, feeding him a mouthful at a time. Her voice was soft and encouraging. "Come, my son! That's good. Eat a little more."

I was sitting quite nearby, transfixed by the intimacy of this commonplace and yet extraordinary scene. Her manner was so soothing. She left the shouting and the dramatics to others in the family. When Rishu finished the plate – it seemed like a miracle to me – Rima got up and went to the hand pump, filled a tall glass with water, and handed it to him. He drank it down in one prolonged gulp.

Although Rima was embedded in a large extended family, and although the surrounding houses were filled with relatives, Rima essentially interacted with only Krishna Devi during the majority of the day. During the mid-afternoon, when Rima had finished the bulk of the housework, she had a couple of hours for rest before starting dinner. She generally spent this time alone, oiling her hair or rubbing her sore feet. When relatives from other households paid a social call, Krishna Devi hosted them while Rima made chai. Because of her position in the

family, she was expected to serve others and express modesty in her comportment. Despite the fact that a cousin from her natal village was married to a man in Amalpur and lived just a one-minute walk up the road, Rima was not permitted to visit her. The two women did not meet. These were Krishna Devi's rules, and no one challenged them. It was as if, even after more than a decade in Amalpur, Rima were still a newly arrived daughter-in-law. Part of the reason for this was that no younger daughter-in-law had arrived in the family to take her place at the bottom of the hierarchy.

Each night Rima made two types of *sabzīs* and a thick stack of *rotīs*. One *sabzī* was almost certainly potatoes. Depending on what was available or in season, sometimes both were potatoes: potatoes fried (*ālū kī bhujīyā*) and potatoes stewed (*ālū sabzī*). With at least ten people in the household – the eight of them, plus Roanne and myself – and sometimes several more, she was making dozens of *rotīs* each day.

After she finished the last *rotī* and wrapped them in a cloth, Rima joined the rest of the family downstairs. Instead of sitting in the bedroom along with the rest of them as they watched the epic Ramayana serial (cf. Mankekar 1999), she positioned herself just on the other side of the threshold, with a partially obstructed view of the TV. No one invited her in. She was the last to eat in the evening, and was often still washing the pots and pans after the others had gone to bed.

Pooja

“You’ll meet Rajesh *cācā* (father’s younger brother). And Pooja *cācī* (father’s younger brother’s wife). And baby Kashish!” Anjali was detailing for my benefit the family members who, in a week’s time, would be visiting in the village. It was a December afternoon a few months after I had arrived in Amalpur. I was sitting on the bench in the courtyard with her and

Krishna Devi. Rajesh lived with his wife Pooja and their young daughter Kashish in Delhi. He had trained as an engineer and worked as a labor contractor on a construction site. It had been more than a year since they had visited Amalpur. Their impending return was highly anticipated by the family in Bihar.

“I wonder what snacks they’ll bring!” Anjali mused. This was her fantasy in the days leading up to their arrival. In fact, any treat that Rajesh might bring – chocolate, nuts, or sweets – was likely available in the local market. But the family considered them too costly to purchase on a whim. A generous uncle returning from Delhi, however, was an exciting prospect, all the more so if he arrived with gifts in hand.

The reasons for their visit were multiple. First, Arati was preparing for her “*second marriage*,” marking her official transition to her in-law’s house. The entire family gathered for the feast prior to her departure, to celebrate the occasion and give her a proper send-off. Second, Pooja was nine-months pregnant, and they had agreed that she would give birth in Amalpur. It was traditional for women in this area to give birth in their natal village. But because Pooja and especially Kashish – three-years old, and no longer a baby – had spent so little time in the village, they had opted for Amalpur. That way the whole family could help Pooja with the new baby and look after Kashish at that busy time.

Pooja was 26 years old, was a plump, gentle and good-natured young woman—almost too good-natured for a family that has a penchant for shouting at one another. Although she was just a few years younger than Rima, there were noticeable differences in their experiences. Pooja had finished high school and had been older at the time of her wedding. Her parents were Bihari Bhumihars, but had lived in Madhya Pradesh. She was a housewife in Delhi, but she seldom left

the small, dimly lit apartment that they shared in a working-class neighborhood on the east side of the river.

In rural Bihar, the youngest daughter-in-law in the family typically took on the most demanding share of the housework, giving the elder women a chance to rest. Rakesh had four brothers, but only Rajesh, living outside the village, was married. The other three brothers had not found employment that might enable them to get married. If they had, the arrival of new daughters-in-law would lessen Rima's burden. So Rima looked forward to having some reinforcement, if not relief, when Pooja arrived from Delhi. But this was not the case, especially given Pooja's advanced pregnancy. Indeed the heaviest burden often fell to the youngest daughter-in-law at the same time that she had the youngest children in need of constant attention.

Pooja had a very different conception of her role and responsibilities in the family from Rima. This became apparent to me on their first night back, as Pooja and Arati snuggled under the covers together, catching up like long-lost sisters. Because of Rajesh's work in Delhi, Pooja had largely avoided the restrictions and grinding work that marked a woman's life in her in-laws' house. The intimacy that Arati shared with Pooja contrasted with the relationship between Rima and Arati, which was more distant and respectful.

During the days immediately following the birth of a healthy baby girl –nicknamed Chorti (Little One), and not formally named until much later – Pooja was secluded in one room of the house with her baby. She emerged only to use the latrine and bathe. The family doted on mother and baby in those early days. While Rajesh and Krishna Devi grumbled a bit about his luck – how difficult it would be to marry off two daughters – the family seemed intent on caring for baby and mother as much as possible.

They purchased a second cow to ensure that the children had copious milk to drink. Rural Biharis valued milk as the cornerstone of a healthy diet for children. And one day Krishan Kant returned from the market with a packet of *halwa battisa*, a mixture of twenty-two ingredients specially designed for new mothers. They fussed over the preparation, making sure it was just right. When Pooja struggled to produce enough of her own milk for the baby, they purchased a bottle and fed the infant cow's milk instead.

When she emerged after sixteen days, the proscribed period of seclusion for a new mother, Krishna Devi and Rima expected that Pooja would begin to take the lead in cooking, as befitting her station as the junior daughter-in-law. Krishna Devi often assumed the tasks of holding and soothing the baby so that Pooja could get work done. This support, though essential, was also fraught. In her own case, Rima believed that Krishna Devi had won her children away from her by bestowing constant affection on them. Similarly, the family loved doting on young Kashish—escorting her to the village shop to buy biscuits, fattening her up with milk, and cooing as she spoke the new Magahi words she had learned in the village. But the unglamorous work of caring for two small children – feeding and bathing and soothing them when they cried – still fell to Pooja. When she did not assume her share of the housework as well, tensions began to surface.

Several weeks after her arrival, I entered the house to find Pooja sitting in the dark alone while the rest of the family sat together in another room. “Staying in your in-law's house is a very distressing (*kaṣṭ*) thing,” she remarked to me. Living there meant that she constantly had to manage her comportment. She could not sit with the rest of the family when Rakesh was in the room. In this area, it is considered inappropriate for younger daughters-in-law to sit in the presence of, or speak unnecessarily to, one's elder brother-in-law. The restrictions on her

mobility did not just mean she could not leave the house. It also shaped her movement through the house, and sense of bodily comfort, on a daily basis.

By contrast, in Delhi Pooja started her day wearing a nightie. Occupied with childcare, she could change her clothes at her leisure. In Amalpur, however, she was constantly in the presence of her husband's family. She chafed at the fact that she had to wear a sari from the moment she woke up until the end of the day. To delay putting on fresh clothes and remain in one's nightie was considered impure for a married woman cooking food for her in-laws. Like many other women, Pooja complained that it was cumbersome to do their housework in such an outfit. Married women in Amalpur often remarked that, no matter how many years had passed, they never felt entirely comfortable in their own bodies as they inhabited these spaces, that they were never fully their own.

Krishna Devi, Rima, and Pooja

The house was full of life and energy in those days. Sometimes in the afternoons, while the men were out of the village, the women made fried snacks for themselves and for the children on the earthen stove. This was just for fun, to pass the time together. Although the men were the ones who left the village regularly, earned the money, and had access to the city's wares, the women could enjoy hot, homemade snacks on a whim.

Every so often, Arati, who at that point came and went for a few weeks at a time, organized a "*jalebī party*." Her husband had given her a bit of money to spend as she pleased. And nothing pleased her more than these deep fried pastries soaked in syrup. She and Krishan Kant walked up to the sweets shop on the main road, where they had 1.5 kilograms of piping hot *jalebīs* packed into a box. When they returned to the courtyard, everyone gathered around.

Krishna Devi doled them out, starting with the children, then me and Roanne, then the men, and then the women. They were almost too hot to hold. Each bite was a hot, sugary, sticky excitement that left a warm feeling in my chest. It broke up the routine fare of rice, bread, potatoes, and lentils, that, however wholesome, we ate every day. There was plenty for all, and Krishna Devi encouraged everyone to keep taking another. We ate until we had stomachaches, and then laid down to rest.

But all the bustle in the house meant more cooking and more cleaning to do. Rima endured long hours of labor as she struggled to keep up with it all. Roanne often sat with her in the evenings alone in the rooftop kitchen space while she cooked. This was both a place of exile and a type of refuge for her. Some nights she was taciturn as she rushed to have dinner ready in time. Other nights, her mood was light, almost whimsical. On one warm spring evening, with the fresh breeze blowing from across the fields, Rima's veil flapped about wildly in the wind. "What a beautiful breeze! It's just like Shimla!" For a woman who had never left Bihar, this was an unexpected reverie for hill station air.

But for Rima those luminous moments were few and far between. Throughout the day the banter and chatter of the family continued, but Rima did not initiate conversation, and the others did not engage her unless to give instructions.

"Nobody speaks to me," she sorrowfully confided to Roanne. "Only Rishu's father," she said, referring to her husband. Out of deference, an Indian wife avoided uttering her husband's name.

Marriage marked a massive rupture in women's lives. Moving to a new village meant forsaking old friendships and routines. A bride arrived in a new house as a stranger, having never met their husband or mother-in-law that would be her closest contacts until her wedding day.

Women had to build new alliances and connections from scratch. And they had to do it when all the other women – especially her sisters-in-law, whose natal village it was – had a lifetime of ties there. It seemed absurd to talk, as the development literature often did, about “empowering women” when, in a patrilocal society, a new wife did not know anyone else and when her movements and labor were being tightly controlled. Such a system rewarded women who were outgoing, boisterous, and liked the banter. None of this described Rima.

Already a sparse and picky eater, Rima’s appetite was sensitive to any perceived slight. So when Rima feuded with Krishna Devi over an obscure matter, it had a noticeably depressing effect on Rima’s well-being. “I don’t know why she’s angry with me. Why won’t she talk to me? I feel down.”

Krishna Devi, still lamenting the recent departure of Arati, her only daughter, at times made pronouncements in front of Rima that questioned her belonging. “The love from your daughter is real,” she proclaimed one day, seemingly apropos of nothing. “The love from your daughter-in-law is not as real.”

More than anything, Rima wanted to be acknowledged by those who matter most to her, to be looked after even in a cursory way by those she looks after. To have her husband, mother-in-law, or children inquire if she’d eaten, and to have them chide her to eat a bit more. These demonstrations of regard and care functioned as invitations for her to focus on her own eating needs instead of her family’s.

In fact, Krishna Devi and Rima shared a similar gender ideology. Their conception of a good wife and a good mother was a woman who was self-denying and put her husband and children first. In this regard, Krishna Devi performed her role as a widow rather ostentatiously.

Whenever I or anyone else brought home snacks and sweets from the market, she waved me away, or passed them off to her children and grandchildren.

I pointed this out to her one day. “It’s true,” she responded. “I only take joy out of feeding others.” It was only when I threatened not to eat a *laḍḍū* that she took one bite and gave the rest to Anjali. Rima was the same way; she’d sometimes eat, but often just gave what she had to Rishu. Despite their shared outlook in this regard, the fact that Rima and Krishna Devi occupied different positions in the home made it so there was little solidarity between them.

Krishna Devi’s prominence in the family was at odds with the stereotype of the Hindu widow. This was largely due to the loyalty of her sons, who were still relatively young, and trusted her to organize the household in a fair manner. Similarly, she was also skillful in forming alliances with women in the extended family who lived in the houses nearby. She held a pension from her late husband’s position as a government teacher. And, crucially, when her husband was alive, he had placed some of the land in her name. At the same time, Krishna Devi’s stature was offset by the careful performance of widowhood—wearing old saris, her continued engagement in household labor, laments about her cruel fate, etc. All this made her a particularly cohesive force in the household at a time when the family was frustrated with its economic situation.

Rima, meanwhile, felt isolated by Krishna Devi’s silent treatment, and began to eat less and less even as she was working harder than ever. She received no substantial help from Pooja, who had her hands full with her own children. For several days, it seemed, Rima had eaten nothing at all. Like most married women in Amalpur, Rima had taken on an intensive fasting regime. Women refrained from eating meals on one day each week as they prayed to that day’s patron gods for the well-being of their husband and children. During these fasts, they were permitted water, chai, fruits, and nuts, but not rice, *rotī*, or vegetables. On a few occasions, I

watched husbands protest that their wives' fasts were unnecessary, or even foolish. But these fasts performed dutifulness and minimal consumption appropriate to women. They also provided them with a means of legitimately requesting specialty market foods, like fruit and dried fruits, which they consumed during the fast, but would otherwise be too expensive.

In Rima's case, the lack of eating and mounting pressure of her labor may have contributed to a nasty fall down the narrow staircase. She frequently navigated this narrow, twisting staircase to the rooftop kitchen while carrying scalding pots. Roanne and I were not in the house when it happened, but we soon learned of her injuries. She cut her foot and hurt her arm, so much so that she had to use a spatula to flip the *rotīs* instead of making them by hand. The pain must have been great indeed, for she always prided herself on not needing any tools in this task.

In the aftermath of the accident, she complained to Roanne about the pain in her foot and arm, in addition to frequent headaches. "It hurts! It hurts a lot!" she repeated. It was upsetting for Roanne to listen to, but there was little we could do for her.

After a few days of light work, Krishna Devi expected her to resume her normal workload and reduce her daily use of expensive painkillers. Rima's desire for food remained suppressed, but she was happy to consume medicine that her husband purchased for her. For Rima, these medicines were not just a substitute for food. Like the dried fruits that her husband brought home especially for her fasts, she prized them in part because they were costly. They thus symbolized her husband's concern, the fact that he was thinking about her well-being even when he left of the village. By eating them, she consumed his gifts, and reversed, in a sanctioned way, the expected flows between husband and wife.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes has observed that recasting hunger as illness has the effect of marginalizing women's experiences and denying the social causes of that hunger (Scheper-Hughes 1992, 169). And on one level, Rima's practice did seem to represent a medicalization of hunger. Illness, and not an appetite for food, was the register in which could advance her own needs. It enabled her to request care at a moment when she felt overlooked. This episode underscores the fact that, eating well meant on being embedded in the context of a caring family. Without a supportive environment, Rima's appetite dissipated and her health suffered.

As the weeks progressed, both Rima and Krishna Devi grew increasingly disconcerted at the ways Pooja managed to avoid her cooking responsibilities. Pooja often complained that she felt tired or unwell. But Krishna Devi was afraid of confronting her lest she talk back and then prevail on Rajesh not to return to the village again so soon. For years, Krishna Devi had simmered with frustration that Pooja had succeeded in keeping Kashish away from them. As her son's child, Krishna Devi felt that Kashish's rightful place was with the family in the village. But Rajesh's job in the capital and capacity to earn an income had disrupted the usual balance of power between the women.

One night, sitting with Roanne on the roof, her face lit only by the fire of the hearth, Rima lashed out at Pooja. "That one doesn't do a thing. Not a single thing! I prepare breakfast and I prepare lunch. Then I clean the clothes. She only has to clean clothes for herself, Kashish, and Chorti. I have to clean for myself, for the children, for Rishu's father, and for Krishna Devi as well. She does not do a single thing! Not a single thing! She sits around all the time."

Picking up a stack of freshly prepared *rotīs*, she raged. "Look at all these, I made them in anger. That one," she seethed, referring to Pooja, "she eats 11, 12, 20 *rotīs*! I only eat two in the

morning, three in the evening, and this much rice,” demonstrating a small fistful. “The men might only have six *rotīs*. Even Ma and Arati only eat so much. But that one, she eats so much!”

Notably, Rima never exhibited any ill-will to her sister-in-law Arati, who, when she was home in the village, only minimally contributed to the housework and spent her time visiting her friends. Rima did not object to this. That was a woman’s right while in her natal home. She reserved her venom for Pooja, the co-daughter-in-law whom she believed had betrayed her. With their differentiated understandings of their obligations of life with their in-laws’, they were rivals, not allies, as they endured life within these walls.

Pooja’s behavior, Rima made clear, was contrary to the principles that had governed her own life as a daughter-in-law in this house: Work without complaint. Maintain bodily decorum. Eat modestly, and only when invited. Put the needs of one’s husband and children first. Despite their ongoing dispute about the medicine and Rima’s workload, Krishna Devi and Rima both critiqued what they perceived to be Pooja’s laziness. It irritated them that she flouted the norms of the house because her husband’s earning power enabled her to do so.

But with two small children to look after, how could Pooja realistically take on the burden of preparing food for the entire household? And with one eye on their nearing return to Delhi, why should she?

As the time neared for Pooja and Rajesh to return to Delhi, Krishna Devi and the other family members began to talk openly about the possibility of Kashish staying behind. It would be too much for Pooja to manage, they murmured, living all alone with two small children in a big city. They suggested that Kashish would be better off staying behind, with the nourishing food and protectiveness of the village. She had thrived in Amalpur, playing with the other children, attending the local pre-school, and being doted on by many relatives. Indeed it was not

uncommon for young children in the village to spend significant stretches of time living with different relatives when they are young.

Upon hearing these musings, Pooja never spoke a word in contradiction to her in-laws. Did she fear she might lose her daughter, as Rima felt she had? Somehow, perhaps by exerting pressure on her husband, Pooja managed to evade those attempts. But I wondered how she felt hearing those words—what it meant to be threatened with having her daughter taken from her against her will, even if only for a few months.

On Pooja's last night in the village, Krishna Devi reclined on the roof with Roanne and Anjali, enjoying the cool breeze. Not long after Pooja had completed her nightly *sevā*, vigorously rubbing Krishna Devi's legs, Krishna Devi returned to her favorite subject: the difficulty of keeping the household together. "After I die," she proclaimed, "this will all fall apart." Her strictness with her daughters-in-law, she made clear, was not borne of ill-will, but out of a legitimate anxiety about the future of her family. This was the way that her ancestors had lived, and she felt that she had a responsibility to follow their example. Referring to the laborious preparation of homemade snacks that she had sent with Arati on her most recent trip to her in-laws, Krishna Devi reflected, "When I go, no one will do these things. Rima won't do it. Pooja won't do it. They don't even know how. And we can't afford to buy these things in the bazaar. So the family will fall apart. It will end. Once I'm gone, everything will be over."

Krishna Devi was speaking both about the challenge of maintaining bonds of sociality with relations among them strained. Her husband, when he was alive, had a secure government job that provided them with a salary and a pension. Her sons, by contrast, had not found reliable work. The upper-caste residents of Amalpur bitterly complained that all the government positions were now going to the lower castes. In place of the salary, pension, and job security of

a government posting, these men could find only poorly paid and highly unstable temporary off-farm employment.

But Krishna Devi was not interested in the broader sociological shifts. She blamed herself for their shortcomings. No matter the cause, she still had to figure out how to balance the household budget. She explained their predicament: “My pension is 20,000 rupees (US \$333.33) per month. That will go with me when I die. Rakesh only earns 7,000 rupees (US \$116.67) in his private job, and he must spend half of that on petrol commuting to and from the city. Rajesh earns money, but only for his family in Delhi. My other sons are not earning. The youngest one, he only comes from the city when he needs money! We used to all live all together in that house,” gesturing across the lane, at the site of the previous home her family once shared with their relatives, now subdivided. “Now each one has his own house. And money just leaks out. None of my sons earns enough to provide for this big house. They won’t keep it together after I go.” As she aged, she lived with multiple physical pains and a general sense of exhaustion that has resulted from a lifetime of domestic labor. But most of all she was left with the daunting sense that everything she has worked for in her life will come apart once she dies.

Amidst the stress of ensuring the family’s well-being, and the anxiety about whether the brothers would care for each other once she was gone, she zeroed on the corrupting influence of Pooja. “My son Rajesh, he used to be so straight-edged (*sīdhā*). Under her influence, they have become so spendy.” At length she enumerated the number of saris that Pooja owned, and where she had obtained them. Singled out for attention were the new earrings that Pooja had allegedly forced Rajesh to buy for her. This line about Pooja’s indolence was all too familiar. Blaming an obstinate, selfish daughter-in-law enabled her to continue to believe that her son was essentially a good man. He was not at fault, according to this point of view, even though he provided little

financial support to the family that remained in the village. While visiting Bihar, he had bought a new flat screen color TV—“for his mother,” he announced with a grin. This gift garnered much attention, and eclipsed the fact that he no longer regularly contributed to the household’s income.

Listening to Krishna Devi’s speech, Anjali chimed in, “Do you know what they eat in Delhi? They don’t eat good food there. She doesn’t cook properly. They eat out in hotels. Or they have packets of Maggi every night. That’s not real food!” Maggi is a popular packet of instant noodles, spiced with *masālā* flavoring. Girls in the village considered it a huge treat, and clamored for it, especially when the men were eating chicken. Meat was off-limits for women of their caste. Yet even as they reveled in Maggi on special occasions, they also deplored it as a shortcut for cooking, more a snack than a true substitute for a homemade dinner. It was so devoid of nutrients that it would be unthinkable to eat it everyday. Anjali’s denouncement of their urban eating habits contrasted with her daydream, months earlier, when she mused about all the wonderful treats her relatives might bring. Sitting on the roof in the dark, another night without electricity, the big city, with all its conveniences, seemed at once alluring and corrupting.

All that time, Pooja was somewhere below in the house, likely preparing her children for bed. But with the open-air courtyard and the sound porous walls, it would not have surprised me if she had overheard their words. If she had, what could she do? Daughters-in-law absorbed the abuses of her in-laws without complaining. Her recourse was in leaving.

The next morning, Pooja sat in the rickshaw, the sleeping baby covered by her sari, gripping Kashish’s hand tightly as she sat on the bench next to her. In both Krishna Devi and Pooja’s eyes were tears.

Rima cried, too, saying, “Now that’s she’s gone, I’m all alone. I’ll have even more work to do.” Part of her sadness, perhaps, was the realization that the one person who might have

become a sister and companion to her in this life had left. The tensions that simmered and boiled over in previous weeks faded away. Everyone remarked that the house felt so quiet and empty without them.

Conclusion

How can I be sure that this story is right? I ask this question on two levels. First, there is the question of accuracy. In writing this chapter, I have mobilized the observations and insights that Roanne and I collected over a period of months. I have done so in order to make an argument about how the world that these women inhabit is constituted. This chapter, more than any other, raises epistemological questions. After all, what could I really know of Rima or Pooja's or Krishna Devi's experience? Did a snide comment reflect a fleeting moment of frustration, or a sign of deep-seated discontentment? Their emotions and responses often seemed opaque to me. I was cognizant that, on some level, they were performing, both for me and for one another. This is the most faithful account I can give, but I am open to the fact that misinterpretations and overlooked moments might have altered this narrative.

Second, there is the question of ethics. These were people who cared for us, who treated us as family. And though I tried to mitigate it, our presence added to their labors. Given our entanglements, what do I owe them? While most anthropologists today take it as doxa that engagement with one's interlocutors is a social good, this is one chapter that I would feel uneasy about if the family were to read it. I doubt they would appreciate seeing their private affairs aired in this way. And yet, if I was not there to tell this story, a story about how people care for each other in the face of precarious circumstances, I do not know why I was there at all. Just because

the story was hard to tell, just because it involved conflict, does not mean it should be avoided. Sometimes hard stories are worth telling. Maybe it's worth it for Rima.

Just as I have struggled with the ethics of my engagements, so too did Krishna Devi, Rima, and Pooja struggle with theirs. In this chapter, I have shown how they negotiated their roles and entitlements in the joint family household, and how these concerns manifest through their food practices. The forms their labor took were a product both of received ideologies of women's roles within the joint family, and the consequence of larger economic conditions that had seeped into domestic spaces. Living in the hierarchy of the joint family household entailed strict rules about bodily comportment. These were intimate intrusions, dictating the way they moved about, bathed, slept, worked, ate, and bestowed or received affection. Feeding was an intimate act, one in which the giver was at once subordinated to and endowed with power over the recipient.

To ask who should do what labor, or when or how much or with whom someone should eat were ultimately ways of asking who counts, and whose needs can be deprioritized. These questions also prompt the question of what a family should be, and who belongs. Although they were all committed to the idea of the family, their different positions and concerns meant that their visions of family life did not always align. For her part, Krishna Devi was committed to sustaining the joint family as a unit against the centripetal forces of disintegration. To do so, she felt, she needed to be strict with her daughters-in-law. Rima, on the other hand, felt herself swallowed up by those strictures. Hers was a quest for a measure of dignity and recognition, a mode of interacting that would permit her a measure of self-care. After all, their ideologies of womanhood entailed putting the well-being of others ahead of their own. Meanwhile, Pooja attempted to strike a balance between the needs of her two young girls and the expectations

others had for her within the family, how to escape unceasing demands on her time and labor. In a sense, then, each woman was grappling with deep and enduring questions about the relationship between self and other, and how to live with others.

Chapter 5

Masculine Appetites: Alcohol, Meat, and the Figure of the Badmash

Just after sunrise on a hot May morning, a group of roughly a dozen men sat in a loose circle in a shady spot beneath a line of palm trees, on the winding path that leads from the paved road to the village of Govindpur. At 5 AM, the sky was already bright. The air was warm, too, on its way to a high temperature of 110 degrees. The walk to Govindpur provided a glimpse, even at that early hour, of Bihar pastoral—men tending grazing buffaloes, women collecting firewood.

But the men seated under the tree had little work to do. They were sharecroppers and farm laborers belonging to the Paswan caste. During the preceding months, the men were up at the same hour, but engaged in the arduous work of harvesting wheat by hand on the farmers owned by the people in Amalpur. By May, however, the last of the wheat crop had been harvested, milled, and stored. The land appeared bare, shorn of its produce. Preparations for the paddy crop would not begin until the first rains arrived next month. This was the agricultural off-season.

And so, during those hot days, the men drank *tarī*, the fermented wine of the ubiquitous palm trees. An unmistakable yeasty smell filled in the air. The men sat on the ground in undershirts and sarongs. Most did not bother to wear sandals.

As they saw me approach, they hailed me and implored me to join them.

In the trees above, a pair of tappers worked, deep in concentration. They were hired men from a different village, and tapping *tarī* was the ancestral occupation of their Chaudari caste. They scaled the soaring palm trees—heaving their bodies 20, 30, 50 feet into the air with deliberation. Once they reached the canopy, they steadied themselves on sturdy palm fronds and

retrieved the earthen pot in which the juice had fermented overnight.

As I arrived that morning, one of the tappers descended from a tree, a fresh pot of palm wine hanging from his belt. Several of the men had grown impatient with the delay, and rushed up to him. One of the leaders of the drinking circle, Mansi Paswan, shook his head. “Look at them! Looting before he’s even reached the ground.”

The tapper ignored the men who had gathered at the base of the tree and returned to the circle. Wordlessly, he poured the *tarī* from an earthen pot into the communal plastic mug, and sharpened his tools for the next ascent. They thrust the mug in my direction. It was hot pink and emblazoned with the words KEEP SMILING.

“Hit this one! (*Maro!*)” they cried. “Hit this one!”

Holding the mug an inch above my lips, I slowly poured the palm wine into my mouth. I found the *tarī* fruity, effervescent, and exceptionally fresh. As soon as I had finished, one of the men grabbed the mug, refilled it, and guzzled the liquid, a liter downed in a single gulp.

As the tappers worked their way down the row of palm trees, the group followed, dispersing and re-establishing itself in a new spot. They continued drinking in this way until 9 or 10 AM, at which point, most of the men had finished four or five liters each, and were already quite drunk. Then they filtered back into the village, as their wives or daughters-in-law had finished preparing breakfast. I kept to one or two rounds, which satisfied them.

Filled with food and drink, they then took a midday nap to avoid the heat. Upon waking, they commenced the afternoon session of *tarī* drinking, which lasted until nightfall. As Mansi proudly explained, “These days it’s sleep, drink, eat. Sleep, drink, eat.” The *tarī* season lasted from May until September.

On the surface, these early-morning *tarī* sessions seem to fit with well-worn tropes about

the backwardness of Bihar—the simplicity, rough manners, and fixation on short-term gratification at the expense of long-term investment. But rather than simply casting this scene as a type of rural bacchanal, or describing it as a subaltern romantic, I read this scene in terms of the ethics of being a Paswan man. The consumption of *tarī* in these gatherings illuminated both norms of sociality in Govindpur, and the ways that these lower-caste men articulated their identities. Specifically, this communal drinking practice illuminates a local ethos of hospitality and a sense of what it means to live properly as a Paswan man. But it is insufficient to attempt to grasp *tarī* purely on a cognitive or symbolic level. Drinking *tarī* was a matter of pleasure, and it was a way that men nourished their bodies in their native place after a year of grinding labor.

Masculine Desires, Masculine Ethics

This chapter examines notions of ideal comportment among rural Bihari men across lines of caste and class. I argue that Bihari men differently articulated an ethos of masculinity through their food practices and ideologies of mobility within and beyond the rural sphere. Different locations within the rural world – such as homes, fields, the outskirts of village, and the cities they traveled to for work – enabled or foreclosed certain eating habits for men. And this shaped the ways they performed their masculinity. Most notably, the valences of proscribed food items like meat and alcohol varied according to one’s position in rural society. Mainstream thought cast these substances as economically wasteful, corrupting to the body and the mind. But some men defended these consumption habits as a benign, or necessary, indulgence. Eating meat and drinking alcohol were activities that allowed lower-caste men to feel free and strong, sustaining them given the difficult labor they were forced to undertake. Some men also reported that consuming these types of foods often stimulates their appetite for sex, so much so that meat,

alcohol, and sex are linked together in popular imagination in India. This in turn introduced concerns about propriety and safety, and the transgressive power of the masculine appetites.

For a long time, gender studies focused on women's identities, leaving masculinity as the unmarked and unexplored category (Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994). The classical anthropological literature on masculinity focuses on ideologies of honor and shame in the Mediterranean world (Hertzfeld 1985; Bourdieu 1977), rather than issues of pleasure and desire that emerged in this context. Scholars have since branched out to investigate the production of masculinity in diverse contexts and classes around the world (Willis 1981; Mains 2007; Mains 2013; Naguib 2015; Sherouse 2016).

The growing literature on masculinity in South Asia runs along two tracks. On the one hand, historians have investigated the ideologies of masculinity that emerged in the colonial encounter, often unpacking the subordinate and effeminate status of Indian colonial subjects vis-à-vis the British rulers (Nandy 1983; Sinha 1995; Chowdhury 1998; Basu and Banerjee 2006). Meanwhile, anthropologists have attended to the situated enactments of masculinity that emerge from a range of religious communities, class positions, and geographical locations (Alter 1994; Axel 2001; Hansen 2001; Osella 2006; Ramaswami 2006; Ghassem-Fachandi 2009; Jeffrey 2010; Chakraborty 2014; Sanchez 2015). Drawing on this burgeoning conversation about masculinity in rural India, I argue that men's activities with respect to food, drink, and movement were central to the production and performance of masculinity in rural Bihar.

Craig Jeffrey draws on the Indian English word "*timepass*," meaning to pass time idly, to describe the aimless experience of rural men in North India (Jeffrey 2010). Many of the sons of landowners, Jeffrey notes, have earned degrees at rural colleges. But those degrees failed to provide them with secure employment. So they loitered, engaged in politics at the college, and

waited for something to happen. A similar dynamic was at play in Amalpur, with the exception that many of the men had little interest in local politics and could not even afford to travel to the college regularly. They directed their time toward socializing with kinsmen (*gotiyār*) from their village.

In this context, food and drink provided a central lens for cultivating the self and assessing the behavior of others. This was not simply a question of what one ought to imbibe, and where and when. Debates about eating practices related in a fundamental way to how Bihari men thought about work and family life. Different types of labors necessitated different diets. Strenuous manual labor required nourishing or strengthening foods to restore the body. Conversely, sitting for examinations for government postings required foods that augment one's mental powers. The dichotomy between these two modes of sustaining the body emerged, for example, in discussions of milk. Rural Biharis claimed that cow's milk was good for the brain. The creamy, fatty milk of the buffalo, on the other hand, was ideal for building strong muscle, but also made a person "thick-headed."

In this sense, the question about what a man ought to eat was ultimately a question about what sort of man he was, and in what sorts of life projects he ought to engage. How should a man fill his days? How should he spend his time and money? Different food practices indexed different ways of inhabiting time and space, and the everyday activities of caring for the self and family. (This was of course true of women as well, as I explain in chapter 4). These eating and drinking practices, I argue, reflected Bihari notions about how best to live. Reflecting on the anthropology of ethics, James Laidlaw's defines ethics as the answer to the question, "How should one live?" For Laidlaw, such an inquiry rests "not on an evaluative claim that people are good: it is descriptive claim that they are evaluative" (Laidlaw 2014, 3). Laidlaw contrasts a

concern with deontology – a juridical approaches to morality, often based on textual rules – with a more open exploration of the virtue ethics, how people variously construct their notions of a good life (Laidlaw 2014). Laidlaw’s work is valuable for its incitement to consider the evaluative categories of people themselves—*emic* explanations for how things ought to be.

Yet much of the literature on ethics, including that of Laidlaw himself, focuses on the ethics of people who consider themselves devout, or style themselves as social activists (Mahmood 2005; Dave 2012; Laidlaw 2014). This amounts to an a priori decision on the part of the analyst, delimiting the field of what might count for ethics. Thinking about the ethics of the common man (*ām ādmī*) redirects discussions of rural Biharis away from their hunger and labor. They are typically considered a population to be managed, not as ethical subjects enacting their own projects and pleasures. Like Mahmood and Anand Pandian, in presenting these eating habits, I do not insist on an ethics that conforms to my own liberal, Western sensibilities (Mahmood 2005; Pandian 2009). Rather, I seek to attend to what Veena Das and Michael Lambek have variously termed “everyday ethics” or “ordinary ethics”—how people’s quotidian habits and choices shed light on their larger ethical frameworks, and the questions of self and sociality that they themselves are asking (Das 2007; Lambek 2010). But an ethics of masculinity cannot be apprehended in a purely cognitive realm. I argue that Biharis projected these questions onto the spatial, material, and embodied coordinates of everyday life—how to eat, how to labor, how to live alongside family and friends.

I suggest that when rural Bihari men described different modes of engaging the world, they grouped their activities into two lexical categories: First, there was work (*kām karnā*), in which a man provided for the family household, either by earning an income, or doing farming and household activities (*khetī-grihastī*). On the other hand, there was a specific male pleasure in

lingering (*baiṭhanā*) or wandering (*ghūmanā*). Lingering was a way that men endured their meager circumstances, often in the company of others and aided by indulgences in alcohol or tobacco. Wandering, meanwhile, was an activity through which men fulfilled the dream of overcoming, at least temporarily, the monotony and marginalization of village life. While lingering and wandering were opposites in one sense, in that the former implied rootedness and the latter mobility, they both suggested embodied state of non-work, whether by choice or compulsion.

These activities seemed at first glance to map onto the locally articulated opposition between the village and the world beyond it. For rural Biharis, much of their work took place in the village—sowing and harvesting crops, caring for livestock, building and repairing a house. Lawrence Cohen points to the householder, a category derived from Hindu thought, as a man who bore the responsibility of providing for the family (Cohen 1998, 205). These obligations included the care of young children as well as elderly parents. Men spoke specifically about paying for their children’s education, and accumulating a dowry for their daughters. This necessitated multiple forms of *sevā* (care)—in addition to looking after people, taking care of animals, crops, farm equipment, and money. Men derived great satisfaction from being able to meet these obligations. It affirmed their manhood and stood as a marker of their success.

These tasks also required people to travel beyond the boundaries of the village, to local markets or towns, in order to provision the household. Other men regularly traveled to nearby towns for tuition classes, which might enable them to pass the all-important entrance exams for government jobs. Most trips out of the village cost money, and even the fare for a bus or an auto-rickshaw – Rs. 20 (US \$0.33) or so – felt dear to a family supporting several people on a single

income. Travel thus prompted anxieties about excessive consumption and unforeseen expenses. They could be seen as wasteful or frivolous activities, shirking immediate responsibilities.

But against a backdrop of pervasive unemployment, where local opportunities for advancement were few, remaining in the village and moving switched valences. Ideally, a man ought to reside in his native country—with the climate, food and drink, and company of relatives whose nature most closely matches one's own (cf. Daniel 1984). For most households, however, migrating beyond the village was necessary to earn money and contribute to the household. A man who refused to travel out of the village to earn money was seen as lazy or useless. But the city, rural people feared, was often a corrupting influence as well. It was the place where lonely men drank their wages, made costly purchases, and ignored the ties that bound them to their native place and the people still living there.

On the surface, these two impulses – work and the avoidance of work – seem inextricably at odds. But Bihari men derived pleasure and self-worth both in fulfilling their obligations to others, and in forsaking them. While this is true of most people, examining the ways that Biharis defined, carried out, or eschewed their responsibilities to others illuminates their notion of masculinity and the terms on which they engaged others.

In the remainder of this chapter, I contrast two modalities of enacting masculine ethics through appetites. First I explore the politics of *tarī*, highlighting the divergent attitudes towards its consumption in rural Bihar based on caste. Rather than framing these drinking practices as depraved, I argue that these gatherings are a crucial site for enacting an ethics of nourishment. I then juxtapose this discussion with an examination of local discourses about the figure of the *badmāś* (scoundrel, sometimes transliterated as badmash) condense many of the anxieties about men's comportment, especially with regards to work, food practices, and movement. In the

conclusion, I underscore the spatiality and temporality of these food practices, and how these debates illuminate competing ideologies of respectability, freedom, and care for the family and the self in rural Bihar.

Seasonal Pursuits

Many of my upper-caste neighbors in Amalpur took a dim view of *tarī* drinking and the public drunkenness that resulted. Several years earlier, in fact, they had banned the tapping of the palm trees within the boundaries of their village, letting the wine go to waste. I asked Rakesh why they had decided to forego an easy source of profit. He recalled that some young men in the village had started drinking regularly, neglecting their studies and household responsibilities. To his mind, the most important investment they could make was in the success of their children. That mattered more than whatever profits might be gleaned from the trees. “If Rishu becomes a drunk,” he said, referring to his son, “then what’s the point?”

By contrast, people in Govindpur were much less concerned with success on examinations and government postings. They had less access to such things, and therefore fewer expectations about them. But just because they were unencumbered with performing caste propriety does not mean that they lacked aspirations or a notion of proper conduct. Rather, their sense of dignity and embodied well-being were at the core of this practice.

Just as these men were eager that I receive a hearty welcome to the village with the first mug of *tarī*, during these weeks they were particularly concerned with offering visiting relatives the proper display of hospitality. During the height of summer, many Biharis who have migrated out of state for work returned to the village. Factories closed, and with a respite from agriculture, Biharis had time to visit relations and in-laws, and to host them as well. This was the peak

marriage season. On one evening, two families in Govindpur hosted weddings. In the days leading up to the occasion, the men were anxious that their visiting relations receive a warm welcome, reciprocating what they had experienced on their visits. During the wedding feast, this meant serving chicken and lamb, copious vegetables, sweets, and plenty of *tarī*.

The anthropology of feasting has described communal gatherings as important sites for renewing relations, redistributing wealth, and reducing jealousy (Ortner 1978; Appadurai 1981). Although these men hailed from the same caste and are mostly distant relatives of each other, the drinkers varied somewhat in their economic positions. Many were struggling; some had prospered, relatively speaking. Most of the households owned little if any land. Those who migrated to the cities for work endured long hours, lived in cramped conditions, and were scorned for their supposedly uncouth and crime-ridden ways. When they returned home, however, they sat on their village lands with their relatives and friends and shared a drink.

As one such returned migrant, Ram Babu Paswan, explained, “We don’t keep an account. A man who owns a tree can drink as much as he likes. No money changes hands here.” This reflected his ideological commitments. But I found out that it was not entirely true. For the regulars from Govindpur, there was no keeping track of accounts. This was quite distinct from the commercialized drinking halls or liquor shops men frequented in the city. Those who owned the trees contracted with the tappers, who came twice a day from a nearby village. They split the proceeds 50/50. But the men who did not own any trees, had to pay Rs. 10 (US \$0.17) for each liter of *tarī*.

In India, abstaining from food and drink has long been, for both individuals and caste groups as a whole, a means of asserting one’s improved status (cf. Srinivas 1966; Cohn 1987; Hardiman 1987). But for the most part, the Paswan laborers in Govindpur did not bother

themselves with self-abnegation. During the colonial period, Paswans were known as Dusadhs, and were categorized as a “criminal caste” under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (cf. Dirks 2001; Pandian 2009). They were notorious as robbers throughout North India. The Patna District edition of the *Bihar & Orissa District Gazetteers*, first published in 1907 and revised in 1924, describes Dusadhs as “a low type and appear to have traces of aboriginal descent” with “a reputation of being inveterate thieves” (O’Malley and James 1924, 54). The *Gazetteer* also observes that they had a penchant for feasting on swine’s flesh, a practice that I did not encounter. The community abstained from the meat of pigs and cows, perhaps pointing at the way they have undergone the process of Sanskritization since independence (cf. Srinivas 1966).

Paswan men in Govindpur downplayed any mention of a criminal past. One man explained that they were in fact Rajputs, noting that they served as “bodyguards” and watchmen (*caukīdār*) for kings and large landowners. They claimed a divine lineage from Arjuna, the Pandava brother from the Hindu epic the Mahabharata. Given their historical occupation and present work, they emphasized the importance of strengthening the body through food and drink. In the hot summer months, drinking *tarī* was a primary means of enacting their caste identity.

In order to understand the particular social and ethical valence of *tarī* as a drink, it is critical to situate it against other alcoholic beverages available in the region. The glass-bottled beer and whiskey sold in English wine shops were far out of the price range of these laborers. Likewise, *dārū* (country liquor), also known as *deśī śarāb* (country liquor), sold in plastic pouches, had a more cutting taste. Beyond the market, the newspaper headlines delivered periodic reports of mass poisoning deaths at the hands of illicit hooch.

Against these options, the zesty and sweet *tarī* appeared much more attractive. Indeed the men repeatedly used the word “*āsamānī*” to describe the drink, a Hindi adjective that literally

means “of the sky,” or “heavenly” or “celestial.” It was an apt term to describe a gift delivered from above. *Tarī* ripened during the summer, when farmers were otherwise idle. So drinking this “juice” – as they also often called it, using the English word – situated them beyond the reach of dual oppression of both the nearby landlords and the costliness of the market.

For returned migrants, drinking *tarī* was enacting a rural nostalgia that reaffirmed caste and regional belonging. Ram Babu was exemplary in this respect. He was a burly man in his 40s, but in contrast to his boisterous neighbors, there was something almost serene about him. Ram Babu had just returned to the village that month from Delhi, and thus had not had a chance to get to know me over the previous several months, as the other men had. Eager to display his hospitality, he quickly appointed himself my benefactor. Whenever I was drinking, he insisted, it was from his trees.

Ram Babu had first left for Delhi a few decades earlier, at the age of 15, with little formal schooling. “In those days,” he said, chuckling, “We were just running around. We didn’t pay school much attention.”

He had worked there for more than twenty years, and has risen to become a foreman in a factory. The city offered him a steady income, and access to a greater variety of foods and entertainments. But when he was there, he concentrated on saving money for his family, and avoided splurging on himself. His biannual trips home provided an opportunity to indulge in the nourishing foods of the village. This nourishment was a particular quality of the drink, to be sure, but also extended to the environment and the company.

As he drank, he contrasted this rural experience with city life. “During these summer months, it’s too hot to remain in the city. You can’t find such a sweet breeze in the city. It’s only in the village that you can drink like this, sitting with companions in the fresh air.” From this

perspective, the sweetness of the *tarī* was not just about the taste of the liquor, but was about friendship and the physical environment as well. During those sweltering days, drinking *tarī* provided the grounds to reverse, at least momentarily, the negative valence of Bihar's underdevelopment. While the villages may have lacked steady electricity and sturdily built homes, sitting in the shade of palm trees offered a respite from the crowded, roasting city.

Many other men who gathered on those mornings shared similar stories of return. Sukinder Paswan, for instance, went to work in Gujarat for a time. He was a middle-aged man, and on that morning, sat shirtless and shoeless, with just a sarong wrapped around his waist. He had found a job as a security guard in a shop, checking receipts as customers left a store to prevent theft. "I went to earn an income, but the water was bad. It was mixed with chemicals, and I fell sick. So I returned home." While migrating offered the promise of money, he found that inhabiting that environment was corrupting. The anthropologist Val Daniel has observed that Tamils feel that their bodily equilibrium is matched to their native place, their *ur*, and that deviating too far from it leaves them out of balance (Daniel 1984). For these Bihar migrants, too, there is an ethical dimension of living in their own country (*deś*).

Daniel describes how his informants understood their body as constantly in flux, engaged in the work of balancing hot and cold flows (Daniel 1984). Likewise, Biharis understood food and the environment in a humoral framework. In hot months, it was necessary to eat cooling foods, and vice versa. Like other alcoholic drinks, *tarī* was considered heating. But the sweeter morning *tarī*, which has fermented overnight, was considered less heating than the afternoon batch, which had brewed in the heat of the day, and had a hard edge to it. In the relative coolness of the early morning, *tarī* was an ideal drink. As Mansi put it, after waking up in the afternoon from an extended *tarī*-induced nap under a tree, "I slept like a baby. If a mosquito bit me, I

wouldn't know it.”

Drinking *tarī* both produced notions of embodied masculinity, and specifically, what it means to be a Paswan man. It was not simply that drinking a lot proved their virility. Because this was a time of rest for working bodies, several of the men suggested that drinking *tarī* was a means of restoring bodily strength. The men also reported drinking for entertainment (*manoranjan*), as hobby (*śauk*), and to satisfy one's desires (*man ke anusār*). Like fishing in the streams, there was a playfulness to the scene. They lounged in stained clothing, descended into intemperate arguments, and reveled in their appetites. Sometimes they played cards, or snacked on *sattū*—a quintessentially Bihari snack made of roasted chickpea flour. They thus expressed what Pierre Bourdieu has described as a working-class ethos of indulgence and conviviality in contrast to the austerity and sobriety of the bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1984, 179).

Moreover, this notion of masculinity was predicated on the assumption that a man must assert his privileges lest he surrender them. “If you drink,” Mangal Paswan explained, “then your wife will obey you. If you don't, she'll demand four different types of merchandise. She'll ask for the *tilak* back from your wedding!” The *tilak* was the ceremony prior to the wedding in which the bride's family bestows gifts on the groom's family.

While the men were drinking, the women were often occupied with looking after the household cow, cooking breakfast, and preparing the children for school. But many of the *tarī* drinkers did not concern themselves with women's work. They were responsible for completing the farm work and marketing chores. Once it was done, they had no compunction about lounging in the shade. The women, for their part, did not exactly object. Some wryly noted that at least it got the men out of the house for a few hours.

For these men, drinking *tarī* also conjured desires for sex. The heating properties of *tarī*,

they said, stimulated their sexual desires. Some men boasted that, when they returned to their homes, they would have sex with their wives. A few of the men even carried a jug of *tarī* back to their homes, which they claimed they would drink with their wives. One young man related to me his excitement about discovering sex on the night of his wedding. He estimated that he and his bride had done it “ten times.” I laughed. This bawdy talk was not something I had otherwise experienced on my many visits to Govindpur. Sex was generally a taboo topic for public discussion in this area. If these lower-caste laborers found it emasculating not to have money, power, or respect most of the year, drinking *tarī* was a means of reasserting their masculine entitlement. It marked both an indulgence of bodily pleasures and a declaration of autonomy during the agricultural off-season.

Sometimes, however, drinking *tarī* was just the last resort for those who had little else to do. One day in early June, I came across Prem Chopra Paswan and Sulender Paswan sitting on the side of the road on the outskirts of their village. In front of them was a single plate of with a mound of white rice and a piece of oily fish, from which they both were eating. Beside the plate was a pair of metal cups, filled with *tarī*.

The two men sat on the very edge of the pavement, so that they almost had to lean out the way whenever rickshaws and trucks rumbled past. They did not seem to mind. Women from Govindpur walked back and forth along this road, traversing the two kilometers from the village to the shops that clustered at the intersection of the main road. But they rarely lingered, lest someone gossiped about them. The men, by contrast, luxuriated in the male privilege of lingering on the road—walking slowly, sitting for a time in one place or another, drinking *tarī* and chewing on *khaini*, a mixture of powdered tobacco and slaked lime that acts as a mild stimulant.

As I sat down to join them that morning, I saw that Prem Chopra was drunk and irritated.

“His wife threw him out the house!” Sulender announced, by way of explanation for his mood.

Prem Chopra groaned.

“And she hit him with a broom!” Sulender added, laughing at the memory.

“I’m not too fond of her,” Prem Chopra seethed.

“His wife is twice the size of him.” Sulender added.

Prem Chopra had married a few months earlier. Since then, they regularly fought about money. I had never met his wife, and did not have the chance to do so. In Bihar, young women who have just arrived in their in-laws’ village typically do not leave the house at first, or talk to strangers. But I thought about what it must have felt like to be in her position. She was alone in an unfamiliar village, likely without many friends or allies. Her husband was not earning any money. This could not be what she had hoped for, or imagined.

Prem Chopra was 25 years old and worked with his father as a sharecropper. He appreciated that, as a sharecropper, a few months of labor provided enough rice for the year. But without additional steady employment, there was no way to earn money.

“I’m Matric Pass,” he said, referring to his success on the Class X examination. He had studied at the local government high school. “But I have no job. What can I do?”

Everywhere I went, it was the same story. Young men like Prem Chopra were not learning anything at school that translated into a marketable skill. Even those who had a BA or MA from a local college struggled to find employment.

Without a steady job, and with no money to go anywhere, Prem Chopra had nothing to do. “I sit here by the road all day long. Only after 8 or 9 PM do I go home.”

He joined the other men from the village there, drinking *tarī* in the morning and in the evening. Sometimes he begged a piece of fish from a friend, or took some food from his house. Drinking alcohol and eating fish were a means of expressing his discontentment, and his entitlement.

Sulender shook his head. He did not have the same conflicts with his wife, but he also lacked work. The men had no money, and no clear way of getting it.

There were few reliable employment options in the area. Some men managed to secure a job in a local town. But those positions were hard to find, and paid poorly for arduous work. Many men left their villages for months at a stretch. They found work in factories in Delhi or Haryana, and returned around Durga Puja, to celebrate festivals and help with the paddy harvest, and then again in mid-summer. Without any other options, I wondered why Prem Chopra had not joined them.

“If no one will show me the way (*rāstā dikhānā*), then how can I go? Alone, where can I go?”

I pictured him riding in the general class of the train, pitching up in an unfamiliar city, with no contacts and no money in his pocket. Without a lead about where to work and where to live, it was too daunting. This was information typically provided by labor contractor (*thekedār*), or a friend from the village. This was the time of year when migrant workers returned to the village, to see their families and celebrate weddings. He would need to wait a few months before people were departing again. Better to remain in the safety and fellowship of one’s own village, even without money.

“That sounds stressful,” I said, using the word *tension* that has become commonplace in North India to describe emotional anxiety about one’s circumstances.

“I don’t have *tension*,” Prem Chopra scoffed. “I have food to eat. I have *tarī* to drink. She is the one who has *tension*!” He raised his cup, and made a show of being unruffled by the whole affair. It seemed a half-hearted gesture.

Suddenly flushed with irritation, he turned to me. “Where did you meet your wife? It wasn’t an arranged marriage, was it? Did you meet her by the side of the road and ask for her number?”

I shrugged, ignoring his comment. It was an insult, questioning her propriety. But there was also an element of fantasy in it. That the side of the road was a place where it was possible to transcend one’s situation. A place where he might act boldly, charm women, and make his own future. And failing all that, in the meanwhile, a place where he might feel a bit of strength and pleasure as the trucks rumbled by.

The Figure of the *Badmāś*

One winter night, I was in bed when I heard the sounds of an argument coming from the other side of the village. It was late, past the time when most residents of Amalpur had retired for the night. But a woman’s cries continued for some time, so I got out of bed, dressed, and went to investigate the commotion. Several of my neighbors, including Gopal and his father Dinesh, had assembled as well, with the hope of resolving the disturbance. When we arrived, two women were standing in the road, sobbing, pleading for support. We stood on the road, shivering in shawls and sweaters, trying to piece together what had happened. The details of the affair initially were murky, aside from the fact that apparently the police had been summoned. Whatever had happened had already concluded. I returned to bed without a clear sense of what had transpired.

The next day, however, my neighbors filled me in on the backstory: The events concerned a young Bhumihar man named Uma Nath, who belonged to the village but had migrated for work. He came from a simple family, and without any local prospects he had found a job as an accountant for a construction company in Haryana, a fast-growing state near Delhi. There he earned Rs. 17,000 (US \$283.33) per month. It was more than three times what most men from the village made in service sector jobs locally. Uma Nath had done well for himself, and people respected him for that. When he returned to the village, he wore new clothes and a gaudy gold watch.

But his time outside of the village had changed him, they said. The police had caught him walking on the main road with a bottle of liquor one night. He repeated this behavior soon after. His sisters begged him to reform his behavior, to refrain from bringing shame on the family. The argument escalated. The police arrived and beat Uma Nath with a baton (*lāthī*). Rumor had it that, amidst the tumult, my neighbor Rajani Kant was also struck in the crossfire.

Rajani put on such airs as a pious Brahman that I had to hear his account of the situation.

“Are you feeling alright, after your beating?” I teased him, when I caught up with him later that afternoon.

“It was nothing. Like the pitter patter of raindrops (*halkā-halkā bārish*).” With one hand he pantomimed the soft taps he received on the arm. Rajani Kant was trying to minimize his involvement. “He was drunk. We were trying to get him home. When the police came, they didn’t stop to ask who was at fault. They mistook me for a drunkard as well. Even the police were drunk!”

“What will happen now?”

“I’ll have to break the friendship.” Rajani Kant’s voice was low. He looked sincerely

pained. “I can’t be associated with someone who would do that. I may sell alcohol” – like Rakesh and Gopal, he had a private job as a wholesaler for a liquor company in the district headquarters – “but have you ever seen me drink it?” I had not. “He is drunk everyday. He doesn’t listen to his family. He really caused his sisters a lot of grief.”

The episode was the talk of the village for days afterward. His drinking habits were a testament to the corrupting nature of the city, and he was seen as a wayward man and a cautionary tale. Uma Nath had been branded a *badmāś*.

Throughout my time in Amalpur, the epithet *badmāś* emerged as a potent assessment of a person’s ethical behavior. Accusations of *badmāśī* (misdeeds) marked moments when people transgressed their social roles and obligations to one another. According to R.S. McGregor’s *Oxford Hindi-English* dictionary, *badmāś* refers to “someone naughty, of bad comportment, or evil” (McGregor 1997, 702). The term encompassed a wide lexical range, from “hooligan” or “knave” to “evildoer” or “devil.” In Amalpur, the meaning of *badmāś* most typically aligned with “scoundrel” or “rascal.” Parents used the word, often playfully, to chide the mischief and naughty behavior of children who disobeyed their instructions or fought with their siblings.

Yet the word also carried a more serious indictment of misconduct. One afternoon I sat in the fields with one of the oldest man in the village, known to all as Baba. Although he was in his mid-80s and had one leg that was badly swollen with lymphatic filariasis, he still went out to the fields to help with the farm work. As he harvested paddy, he lamented the lack of industriousness in the younger generation. But he cast the ultimate blame elsewhere. “The biggest *badmāś* of all is the father (*bāp*)!” he cried. “Do you know why? Because the father just gives his sons money without requiring hard work.”

Concerns about the morals of young men were rife. Krishna Devi decried the behavior of

a cousin from another village who spent his days drinking whiskey and beer with friends in a shop in the nearby town. In addition to the expense, this led to fighting (*mār-pīt*). An accusation of theft followed. They were surprised and disappointed to learn of his bad character. They blamed him for neglecting his responsibilities and letting down his family.

And during Deepawali, the residents of Amalpur contributed to a fund to install a statue of Lakshmi in the village. The painted terracotta figure was placed on the porch of a house in the center of the village, and some of the people gathered in front of it for a public worship on the first night of the festival. In one of the goddess of wealth's hands, someone had placed five ten-rupee notes, taped together end-to-end—a symbol of the riches people that people hoped for in the coming year. The statue remained there, an object of veneration, until it was removed from the village at the end of the festival.

At some point during the festival, I walked past the house with Bhopal. He stopped suddenly, noticing the money was missing.

“Someone stole the money right from the hand of god! What *badmāśī!*” he cried, shaking his head.

Some in Amalpur blamed the laborers from Govindpur who often past through the village. It was common for them to cast aspersions of their morality and conduct, as they did when they suggested that when they did not turn up to work in the fields as promised, it was because they were drunk on *dārū*.

In addition to disparaging the misbehavior of those below them in terms of *badmāśī*, people in Amalpur also spoke of the misconduct of corruption of politicians. On this issue, I found that people's responses to the criminality of politics vacillated between outrage at the transgressions and admiration at the skillful manipulation of power (cf. Witsoe 2011). On the

second night of Diwali, during the period when the Bihar State Electricity Board mercifully graced us with a few days of uninterrupted electricity, Rakesh's family gathered around the small TV set to watch the film *Mr. Badmash*. With the frequent cuts in electrical supply, it was rare that they ever managed to watch a film from start to finish. This film was a Hindi dubbed version of the 2008 Tamil film *Vambu Sandai*. In the film, the protagonist discovers that he must avenge the murder of his family. The title character recalled the “angry young man” characters of Amitabh Bachchan. Although formulaic, it proved a pleasing, carefree film for a holiday evening. Even a family concerned with respectability and good conduct found something admirable, almost heroic, in this display of righteous aggression.

When used to describe the transgression of obligations on multiple scales – family, community, nation – the term *badmāś* served to make different types of behavior equivalent. It magnified small faults and personalized abstract infractions. But in marshaling the figure of the *badmāś*, Biharis also rearticulated structural inequalities as personal failings. It is in this instance that the question of *badmāśī* became somewhat more ambiguous.

At 29, Krishan Kant was a man who had struggled to find his place. He regularly set off for the city to sit for exams for a government posting, but he was not successful. In between, he busied himself with a range of agricultural and household tasks for the family—overseeing farm work, running errands, bringing vegetables from market, etc. Each day brought a different task or chore. He lived in a state of limbo, without a settled and ordered routine. While many of his peers in the village were married with children, the feeling in the household was that Krishan Kant must first have a steady income before starting his own family. Doing so would command the best dowry from a family seeking a match.

With a sunny disposition, Krishan Kant did not often complain. But over the course of my time in the village, there were moments in which he lamented his vulnerability. “I need to beg for ten rupees (US \$0.17) from my brother or Ma just to go to the bazaar,” he said to me one morning, dressed in his smartest clothing, as he headed out to spend a few hours purchasing supplies in the market. His pocket was filled with money, but nothing that he had earned on his own. This meant that he could not indulge himself as often as he liked. Eating eggs or purchasing juice from a stall in the market, which were deemed important for maintaining mental and physical strength for a young man, often seemed too costly.

A year or two before my arrival in Amalpur, Krishan Kant had fallen into the routine of meeting friends in the afternoons at a roadside shack to order snacks. As the bill accumulated, Krishna Devi eventually pulled him aside and pointed out that such behavior was wasteful. Unable to afford it, he dropped the habit.

During my weekly trips to the nearby market, I often brought back a bottle of Mango Frooti, a favorite soft drink of mine, and one unavailable for purchase in the village. I placed the bottle on a shelf in my room. Krishan Kant had observed my habits. Whenever I returned, he visited me in my room and, upon entering, immediately helped himself to some of the juice, always careful not to let the bottle touch his lips. At first, I was irritated that he neglected to ask. But I let it go once I realized how little opportunity he had to treat himself.

Krishan Kant’s situation was complicated by the fact that success on his exams and his agricultural exertions required nutritious food. He drank large quantities of milk morning and evening. He also purchased a large bottle of *amla* (gooseberry) juice, which he believed would fortify the mind. It tasted terrible, and we all laughed about it. But since it was Ayurvedic and promoted health, such a purchase was sanctioned.

One morning, several months into my stay, Krishan Kant announced that he was giving up chai. This surprised me since I knew how much he enjoyed it. But he was resolute.

“I don’t have any vices—not alcohol, not cigarettes, not chewing tobacco (*nā śarāb, nā cigaret, nā khaini*). This will erase my last bad habit.”

It was a project of purification, an attempt to make himself worthy of the future to which he aspired.

Krishna Devi chimed in. “Chai is the worst addiction. If you don’t drink it, you’ll get a headache.” But for hard-working people, whether in domestic spaces or in markets, the milk and sugar in a cup of chai was essential in sustaining the body between meals.

Krishan Kant also embraced vegetarianism, albeit unevenly. Soon after I arrived, he led me to a neighbor’s house for worship (*pūjā*) for Ananth Chaturdasi, which people in Amalpur referred to simply as Anant Puja. Anant is the snake upon Vishnu rests. As such, this worship required that devotees take a vow (*vrata*) of vegetarianism and tie a *bandhan* (string) around the arm above the elbow, to be worn continuously thereafter to symbolize that commitment.

“Now you understand all of Indian culture,” Krishan Kant proclaimed, claspng me on the shoulder, as we left the priest’s house after the ceremony. I had been in the village little more than a week.

But the fibers of the *bandhan* frayed over time. A few months later, on a lazy Sunday morning, Rakesh went out to the market to purchase a chicken. It cost Rs. 220 (US \$3.67), a considerable sum for them. They could only afford this rare treat every month or so. Even as people uphold their caste respectability through food, meat eating is on the rise among upper-caste men in rural India. Men consider it a source of bodily strength and pleasure unavailable elsewhere.

Krishna Devi, however, would not allow them to bring meat into her vegetarian Vaishnava household. So Krishan Kant set up a makeshift stove in the cowshed (*gauśālā*) with a few stray bricks. Crouching there in the semi-dark, he cooked the meat in a mixture of spices and onions.

When we sat down to eat on the concrete floor in the narrow corridor between the house and the cowshed, his vegetarian vow had lapsed. The *bandhan* needed to be removed. But this was not considered *badmāśī*, but had come to be seen as a permissible male entitlement. Even as she had hectored us about bathing immediately afterwards to cleanse ourselves, Krishna Devi had also legitimized the meal by chopping up the onions. Her nurturing impulse had got the better of her. Krishan Kant, meanwhile, could, and did, resume wearing the *bandhan* at another festival.

Krishan Kant's story points to the ways that employment status, service to the household, and eating habits were a prism for viewing a man's ethical conduct. But moral judgments were not always clear-cut. I never heard anyone from the family call Krishan Kant a *badmāś* for being unemployed. That would have been an aggressive statement, and unfair to a person who devoted so much of his time helping his family. Although Krishan Kant's inability to find a job frustrated them on some level, they did not blame him. It was a common story in Amalpur. Instead of lashing out at his shortcomings, Krishna Devi denounced herself as a *badmāś* for not raising a son who was well-positioned to earn a living. She blamed herself for his struggles.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have identified the different ways rural Bihari men enact an ethic of masculinity, and how they routed these ideas through their food practices. Through food and

drink men produced themselves as gendered subjects, and more precisely as ones who inhabited a specific social slot, in terms of caste and class, within the larger rural world. Their appetites and desires reflected local notions of respectability, power, and bodily strength. I have emphasized the way that these food practices were spatialized, rooted in the landscape and their movement through it. Eating and drinking in far-off cities, or at the edge of the road, or on a bench in one's courtyard each indexed different notions of manhood.

Biharis paid so much attention to these food practices because they provided a lens onto a man's ethics, and the propriety of his conduct. Beyond the personal level, local discourses about eating meat and drinking alcohol contributed to an ongoing struggle over the Bihari character as represented in mainstream Indian culture. Was the Bihari an industrious worker, sacrificing his body for his family? Or was he a lazy lout, whose undisciplined appetites undermined any chance of personal or social development? These questions were not definitively resolved; there were many competing notions of Bihari identity that could not be reconciled. But they mattered to people a great deal all the same, or perhaps more, because of it.

One reason that Biharis were so invested in defining and maintaining proper comportment was that the morality of both movement and consumption were more ambiguous than they initially appeared. I have pointed to the fraught nature of these behaviors, where these indulgences might be read in multiple ways. Despite the framing advanced by my upper-caste neighbors, the division between masculine respectability and the indulgence of appetites was not as neat as they claimed. Many Paswan men in Govindpur abstained from meat and alcohol. Their renunciation signaled a project of respectability and an ethos of self-denial. Conversely, some Bhumihar men in Amalpur were known to partake. Even for those who claimed not to drink alcohol or eat meat, there were social situations – a chicken dish at a work retreat, a glass of

whiskey with a visiting brother-in-law – that demanded it. Over the course of men’s lives, their obligations and their appetites shifted.

More to the point, there were often multiple interpretations of the same activity. On one occasion, for instance, a group of young men from Amalpur hired a rickshaw to take them on a daytrip to visit local tourist sites. They spent a considerable amount of money traversing the landscape, and indulging in local delicacies along the way. On their trip, they came across a temple of Hanuman, and they stopped to petition the deity for success on the upcoming round of exams. This was not done in bad faith, as a means of recasting a frivolous outing as a sacred journey. Rather, it suggests that in performing their masculinity, men’s obligations and pleasures were often intertwined, and not so easily extracted.

Chapter 6

Refusing Scarcity: Affiliation and Abundance in a Regional Festival

Just after dawn on a chilly November morning, on the sixth day of the Hindu month of Kartik, Urmila Devi stepped down from the *ghāt* (river steps) and submerged her body in the placid waters of the Mohane River. After a moment, she resurfaced, shivering slightly, with her hair wet and her soaked red sari wrapped around her body. Standing on the lowest step, water dripping off of her, Urmila turned to face the rising sun, offering her prayers and an overflowing winnowing basket (*sūp*) to Surya Bhagwan, the Sun God. The *tilak* (sacred mark) of vermilion powder that her daughter-in-law had smeared on her face, from the tip of her nose to the top of her head, identified her as a Chhath *vratī* (devotee). Her stooped back was both a product of her age and the weight of the produce in basket. It contained coconuts, bananas, stalks of sugarcane, radishes, mango leaves, burning incense, and tiny clay lamps (*dīp*) with flickering wicks dipped in oil. This was her family's *prasād*, sacred offerings to god that are consumed by worshippers at the conclusion of the ceremony. Urmila's family gathered around her, lifting a brass *loṭā* (vessel) above the basket to pour out an offering of water. The water dribbled out slowly – as slowly as they could manage – just beyond the front lip of the basket. Their hands outstretched to touch the vessel, connecting them to this sacred moment of *pūjā* (Hindu worship), and through this act, to each other.

This scene, the sunrise offering (*usha ārghya*), has become iconic of Chhath Puja, the four-day Hindu festival popular in Bihar. During the celebration, devotees make offerings to Surya Bhagwan, also known as Bhaskar, and his wife, Chhathi Maiya. Photos of this climatic moment in the festival grace the front pages of newspapers around the state and the country,

displacing, temporarily, the images of deprivation typically associated with Bihar. A row of smiling woman, dressed in bright saris of orange or yellow or red, stand in a river, the gentle dawn light splashed on the cornucopia of their winnowing baskets. It makes for an arresting portrait of plenty and calm in a state known for neither.

My neighbors in Amalpur frequently referred to Chhath Puja as their “most sacred festival,” the one that best expressed the quintessential essence of their state and region. Widely celebrated in the eastern part of North India – in the states of Bihar, Jharkhand, and in parts of Uttar Pradesh and Bengal, as well as Nepal – Chhath Puja was most closely associated with Biharis. Newspaper articles covering the event for a national audience often referred to it as a “primitive” or “ancient” festival, reinforcing the “backwardness” of Bihar. Bihari migrants have spread the festival all over the country, and it has become a major celebration among Biharis living in Mumbai (cf. Shrivastava 2015; Hardy 2016). Many other migrants return to their native villages for the event. Although Biharis described Chhath as the most important occasion on the calendar, it appears in the scholarly literature only infrequently (cf. Cummins 2001; Saran and Pandey 1992).

Chhath Puja (properly transliterated as *chath pūjā*) occurs twice a year, once in the month of Kartik (October/November) and once in the month of Chait (March/April). The two festivals are thus known as Kartik Chhath and Chaiti Chhath. The former is more widely celebrated, both across Bihar and in the village of Amalpur. The four-day festival is called Chhath because its final day falls on the sixth day of the lunar cycle (*chath*). The festival’s proximity to other important religious occasions on the calendar – six days after Deepawali in Kartik, six days after Holi in Chaitra – means that a large number of migrants are often present in the village for the occasion. The festival entails a series of fasts, worships, and feasts that culminate in a pair of

ceremonies at the river at sundown on the third day and again at the following sunrise the next morning.

People in Amalpur tended to observe Kartik Chhath. By contrast, in Govindpur people tended to observe Chaiti Chhath. Part of the reason was that their grain stores are fuller at that time, having just been replenished by the rice harvest a few months before. Kartik Chhath, by contrast, occurs before the harvest was been completed, at a time when many poor households feel pinched. Of course, there were households in each village that observe both, or buck the dominant pattern, or observe neither.

In this chapter, I underscore the importance of Chhath Puja in rural Bihari life by demonstrating how the festival binds the family together, enables reciprocal exchanges within the village, and illuminates Biharis' articulation of their own regional identity. This analysis of Chhath Puja reveals that these spheres of belonging – family, village, region – were not mutually exclusive but layered on one another. I point to the ways that, at different important moments in the festival people share food as a means of fostering and reinforcing these connections. In particular, I emphasize how the events of the festival fostered a sense of horizontal fellowship among men in the village, and intimate ties among women in the extended family. Moreover, I argue that by celebrating with friends and relatives, Chhath devotees experienced moments of embodied and affective release from the monotony of everyday life. This was an opportunity for them to refuse the logics of scarcity that govern daily life in rural Bihar.

As a festival focused on ensuring the prosperity and fruitfulness of the family in the coming year, Chhath Puja illustrated the multiple forms of care that devotees direct to persons and bodies, objects like foods, crops, and cooking utensils, and deities that might ensure the family's well-being. Matriarchs of the household are typically the primary Chhath *vratī* for each

household. But they collaborated with others in the family in their preparations and fulfillment of the rituals. In the celebration, the definition of family emerges as elastic—one that did not fit neatly within prevalent definitions of either the nuclear family or the joint family in India. Rather, as will become clear, people incorporate distant relations and neighbors into their celebrations in creative ways that emphasize the openness and flexibility of kinship bonds.

Chhath Puja also elucidates the processes through which Biharis construct themselves as Bihari. Their sense of a distinctive regional identity is heightened during this festival, when people worship regional deities, consume regional foods, and sing songs in regional languages. This is particularly evident in their preparation and enjoyment of regional cuisine and seasonal foods, which devotees first offer to god and then share with each other. When I asked my neighbors, for instance, why they ate this food or did that *pūjā*, they often invoked their regional identity: “Well, because we’re Bihari, aren’t we?”

Attending to regional identity shifts the focus away from the national frame that has dominated both scholarship on South Asia in general and food studies in South Asia in particular (Appadurai 1988; Mukhopadhyay 2004; Siegel 2015). This provides a corrective to a hegemonic era in South Asian scholarship that framed social phenomena with reference to the development of the nation (Chatterjee 1993; Amin 1995; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003; Goswami 2004). “Nation” is a category that certainly exists and has great emotive and practical force in Amalpur. But the national frame has not penetrated the countryside in a homogeneous fashion. As a structuring category, it often seems less applicable to people’s everyday lives than other forms of belonging. Turning to the region as a unit of analysis, however, reveals how these delimited forms of belonging – that is, a sense of Bihari identity, or a connection to Magahi-

speaking areas, or Nalanda district – that are constitutive of people’s daily lives and social practices.

Along these lines, Ajantha Subramanian advances an argument for focusing on “region” as a primary force shaping the perspectives of South Asian people (Subramanian 2009). Indeed region has recently reasserted itself in a variety of ways in South Asia: through politics, as regional (*kshetrīya*) parties have challenged national stalwarts; in language, as cities have been renamed according to regional practices; in culture generally, as the entrenchment of India on the world stage has prompted greater awareness of its multiple cultures, each with their own dress, dance, food, and music. To some degree, of course, this is an old story, as ethnic and linguistic groups demanded their own states in the decades following independence (Brass 1982). But at this moment thinking through the region underscores the divergent aspirations, economies, and habits of people in India.

Focusing on region also redirects attention from a second problematic category, the “local.” Like the local, the borders of region are fuzzy. But with Chhath Puja in particular and the quotidian aspects of rural life in general, people in Amalpur do not claim that their experience was unique to their village. Rather, they are aware that this festival, its food, and social relations are widely shared within Bihar, and beyond. Instead, the festival hinges on circulations—of family members and migrants to other parts of the country returning home, and of devotees flocking to sacred sites. This is part of what gave Chhath Puja its force—the knowledge that millions of Biharis are simultaneously celebrating this festival. To be sure, this is an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991), but one that resonated with people’s situated historical, economic, and social experiences.

During my time in Amalpur, I witnessed three Chhath Puja celebrations. Each time, my neighbors presented me with a choice. Some devotees left the village for the entire festival. Often, they traveled to the Baragaon Mela, a locally famous pilgrimage site for Chhath Puja about 20 kilometers away. Each year hundreds of thousands of devotees from all over Bihar came to the banks of the lake there. Baragaon stood at the center of regional networks during this festival. My host Rakesh invited me to join him, to stay with his in-laws, who lived in a village quite near to there. I could join their party and see the throngs celebrate.

I considered this, but demurred. I was most keen to see how the festival unfolded away from the center of action. How did families and kinsmen in the village celebrate it in their own space? What did this festival, their most sacred, mean to them? I knew that the spectacle of the massive gathering at Baragaon derives its potency and vitality from the small groups of families who arrive to conduct the rites. For this reason, I decided to explore that same sense of intimacy among the people that I had come to know in Amalpur. This was not, however, to call the festival “local,” but to see it as an enactment of regional identity in one situated place.

In the remainder of this chapter, I describe various moments of the Chhath Puja festival: the circuits that men took visiting each other in their houses; women’s practices of food preparation while fasting; and the climatic worship at the river. In the conclusion, I return to the construction of regional and family belonging, and underscore the ways that the festival allows devotees to forestall the logic of scarcity that governs their daily lives.

Village Circuits, Communal Exchanges

On the second day of Chhath Puja, known as *lohanda* or *kharna*, devotees complete a day-long fast. After the evening worship, they distribute *prasād*. On this evening, the village

tradition holds that residents of Amalpur circulate through the village, sharing this sacred meal with one another. These exchanges demonstrate a person's belonging not just to a particular family but also their incorporation within the social body of the village as a whole.

Scholarly accounts of *prasād* have emphasized the special relationship between worshipper and deity (Ramanujan 1992; Toomey 1992; McGee 2003; Pinkney 2013; Pinkney 2014). Indeed *prasād* is characterized as an exchange which a devotee makes an offering to god, and then consumes the leftovers as a divine gift. Any food or substance prepared specifically for the purpose of feeding a deity and then sanctified through worship can become *prasād*. Some foods, like fruits and sweets, were considered auspicious (*śubh*) and were often used for this purpose.

In contrast to scholarly approaches that center on the devotee's personal relationship with the divine, the circuits on the second night of Chhath Puja demonstrate how *prasād* elucidates and strengthens social networks and ties within the village. To some degree, this is evident at ceremonies throughout the year. For instance, at the Saturday *pūjā* outside the Maa Jagdamba temple at the entrance the village, devotees wrap up the crystalized sugar *prasād* (*misrī*) in newspaper to bring home to family members. Similarly, whenever a family completes a *pūjā* for a private reason, they share the *prasād* to friends, neighbors, and visitors. Although *prasād* is technically divine leftovers, it is also personalized through these exchanges. It is the one food that cannot be refused. In this sense, sharing *prasād* with family and friends continues a chain of connection that begins with the deity's first bite.

After nightfall, I joined the men from my neighborhood who were gathering in the lane—Krishan Kant and his brother Ramesh, Dinesh and his sons Gopal and Bhopal Kumar, their cousin Ravi Kumar, and their neighbors Bhaskar Kumar and Sindhu Pandey. In early November,

the evening air was cool but not yet cold. A few of the men had thin shawls wrapped around their shoulders. Others wore sweaters and blew on their hands to keep warm. We stood around for a few minutes, waiting for others to filter out of their houses. The mood was light and jocular as our band of six or eight set off in the direction of the north side of the village.

“Instead of eating in one house,” Bhopal announced, “tonight we eat in thirty houses.” My neighbors in Amalpur had been talking about the celebrations surrounding Chhath for weeks. They insisted that the second night was one of the festival’s high moments. No one in the Amalpur cooked or consumed a typical meal of *rotī-sabzī* (bread and vegetables) or *dāl-bhāt* (rice and lentils) that night. Instead, the men circuited the village in small groups, stopping at the door of each house actively observing the festival to take *prasād*. It most closely resembles a form of exchange known as progressive or traveling dinner in the Western tradition.

On this day, all the households in the village actively observing Chhath prepare a *prasād* made of *rasaio kheer*. This is rice pudding sweetened with sugarcane juice, heated over the fire, and topped with *chanā dāl* (chickpeas). Women prepare the dish while fasting, attending to it for hours as it cooked. Unlike most fasts in Amalpur, this fast is often conducted with a restriction on drinking water. People in Amalpur consider it auspicious to use new grains of rice from this season’s paddy crop for the dish. Although they have not completed the harvest at this time, farmers cut a small portion of the crop in order to have something to bless. Along with the *rasaio kheer* that is the specialty of this day, families also prepare *pūrīs* (fried flatbread) and set out bananas as an offering to Surya Bhagwan. Each household produces these dishes in large quantities to share with their neighbors. At the conclusion of the sundown *pūjā*, they served *prasād* to their guests in *kaṭorīs*, small bowls made of folded leaves or Styrofoam.

As with all social functions in Amalpur, Chhath Puja is a highly gendered occasion. The men's circuits of the village made for a night of homosocial bonding, hospitality, and gustatory indulgence. A man either visits dozens of households, or remains at the threshold of his own house, dispensing food and welcoming dozens of visitors. The evening is an opportunity to connect with friends and relations amidst the busy harvest season.

In doing so, there is an enforced equality to the evening. On this night, each household serves the same *prasād*. It is not possible to individualize it. This is also a rare occasion of inter-caste dining in Amalpur. Upper-caste men eat at lower-caste homes, and vice versa. There is no restriction on male movement through the village. "This festival has no caste. It's just a Hindu festival," Bhopal explained. What he meant was that people valued the festival for providing a moment when the hierarchies and strictures of everyday life are undone.

The other festival in Amalpur that exhibits this ethos of equality is Holi. While Holi is famous in North India for its play with colors, in Amalpur men also play with dirt. On the morning of Holi, while men dressed in an undershirt and a sarong (*lungī*) are busy cleaning out their homes and gutters, they smear each other with mud and dirt. No man is allowed to escape unsullied. Men travel around the village searching out those who have not been dirtied, covering them with dirt if they tried to resist. They then bathe and play with colors in the afternoon. But while Holi is premised on an inversion that keeps hierarchies intact, Chhath emphasized egalitarian reciprocal feasting that suspends hierarchy.

On the second night of Chhath, exchanges of *prasād* are also a constitutive element of the evening for women, even for the married women who typically do not leave the home. Women spend the night dishing up *prasād*, which they passed to the men in the family to serve to guests. When the flow of visitors slows at some point in the evening, women from the houses that are

hosting carry a portion of their *prasād* to share with women in the homes of close neighbors and relatives in the village. They return carrying a plate of the *prasād* from those homes. The movements of women are typically more circumscribed and localized than those of the men—they visit and exchange with only close neighbors and relatives, not distant kin on the far side of the village.

As I walked across the village with my group that evening, my companions explained that some households observed Chhath each year, and other households join them to assist in the preparations, particularly if a close relative is the one hosting. The matriarch of the family is the one who dictated whether, how, and with whom to observe the holiday. In a typical year, roughly 30 households in the village celebrated Chhath Puja. But this year, because there had been a death in the village just a few days beforehand during Deepawali, a number of families related to the deceased were not participating as they intended. It was forbidden for the deceased's kinsmen (*gotiyār*) to celebrate festivals during the twelve-day period of mourning. My companions estimated that this occurrence had reduced the number of households hosting Chhath this year by five or ten. Still, there were plenty of places to stop. We would not, I was repeatedly assured, be going to bed hungry.

We arrived at the first house to warm greetings. The hosts, a middle-aged man and his grown sons dressed casually in sarongs and sweaters, did not delay in handing us each a plate of *prasād*. Standing in the lane, in a semi-circle in the front of his door, we ate, scooping the food with our right hands. Although I had tasted *kheer* many times, this *rasiao kheer* had a rich sweetness that was balanced by the savory topping of the *dāl*. Our visit lasted only as long as it took for us to finish our dishes. It concluded without formality—just a simple nod of the head before my companions whisked me onwards to the next house. It was an obligation for both

hosts and guests to take part in this exchange, and it pleased them to fulfill it. While these were warm encounters, they considered excessive expressions of gratitude unnecessary.

The second stop on our tour was just a few paces down the lane. Here we were greeted by another man, the patriarch of his household, and promptly served another plate of food. It was the same dish, *rasiao kheer*, but also subtly distinct in a way that I could not quite pinpoint. When we finished, we tossed the leaf plates in the pile with cow feed, leaving it for the buffalo to munch on. The hosts offered us a *lotā* of water, and we took turns pouring it into our mouths, careful not to let our lips soil the vessel. Then we walked over to the communal hand pump. Krishan Kant gave it two or three light taps as we each crouched and washed our hands in turn, shaking off the excess water. Like the first one, this visit lasted five minutes at the most.

The fourth house, that of Arun Kumar, was just around the corner. I continued to eat with gusto. My hosts asked if we celebrated Chhath in my country, and were dismayed to learn it was unknown there, with the exception of any Biharis who lived there. I quickly assured them that the food was tasty indeed. But when they asked if I might like a second helping, Krishan Kant intervened, counseling me to decline. We still had many houses to visit. We moved on before I could be persuaded to take a second plate.

At the fifth house, Bhopal announced, “Eating this type of food, the stomach never gets filled.” The capacity to eat a lot of food was a key performance of masculinity in Amalpur. Stories circulated about laborers who ate upwards of 20 or 30 *rotīs* in a single sitting. In this case, however, Bhopal’s statement was less about the capacity of the eater and more about the quality of the food. As a gift from god, this was a special kind of meal. His claim reflected a sense that this display of hospitality engendered a form of sociality that was without limits.

At the seventh house, we continued to greet friends and eat *kheer*. Despite Bhopal's announcement about the preternatural qualities of this *prasād*, I began to feel my stomach filling. I mentioned this to Krishan Kant. He nodded knowingly and said, "We have to keep going even when full. If you don't go to a house to eat, it causes a lot of problems (*takalīf*)."

At the tenth house, spirits were high as three neighbors merged their band with our group. Meanwhile, one member of our party had dropped off somewhere, likely detained by a friend or some pressing discussion. We trooped onwards. He would probably catch up, my companions said, unconcerned.

After visiting a cluster of houses in the northeast quadrant of the village, we walked down a darkened lane toward the Kahar Tola. Amalpur is a Bhumihar village, but Brahmins and Kahars live there as well. When its Bhumihar founders settled in this location, Kahars, traditionally a caste of "water carriers" arrived with them, working as servants and nurses for the Bhumihar landlords. This system of labor was a local variant of the *jajmāni* system (cf. Raheja 1988). Today only a few Kahars continue to work as servants for Bhumihar families. Mostly landless, men from these households migrate out the village for work. Although the antagonism experienced in other multi-caste villages in North India is not present (c.f. Wadley 1994), the Bhumihars and Brahmins typically do not often socialize with Kahars. Chhath Puja is a notable exception.

At the fifteenth house, we announced ourselves at entrance. Lights were strung above the doorway, making for a festive scene. A man popped out, evidently happy to see his visitors. It was a quiet corner of the village. His young children quickly brought out plates, and we dove in once again. The relations between the men were warm, but not as intimate as the greetings between Bhumihar kinsmen at the start of our tour. Nonetheless, at a moment when people in

Amalpur continually complained about caste politics – and specifically about which castes were benefiting or disadvantaged by government reservation policies – this was a genuine moment of inter-caste exchange.

As we walked to the next house, Gopal expressed surprised that one of the buildings on the lane had been subdivided to form separate households. His cousins chided him, noting that the last time he had walked down this particular lane he must have been a teenager. Without a festival like Chhath, there was no reason for him to visit this area. My companions shared my pleasure in seeing parts of the village that we did not usually visit, especially at that time of night.

At the seventeenth house, the strain of the evening was starting to show in the behavior of my companions. When they brought out the first four plates, we protested that this was enough. We could share amongst ourselves. And so while I held the plate, Krishan Kant and I scooped up the *kheer* together. As we ate, I was hit by an unexpected surge of happiness. It struck me that for the months I had lived in this village, I had never shared my dinner plate, as Krishan Kant often did with his mother or brothers. Instead I was served as an honored guest, always first and separate. That was the way they wanted it. Recognizing the importance of hospitality, I did not protest. But for a moment that evening, as we stood there in the half-light, a slight chill in the air, I felt included in the life of the village in a way that I had not yet before.

The nineteenth house, a spacious and sparsely furnished building, belonged to an elderly man whom I had just met the week before. He was a prominent farmer in the village, though he wound down his activities years ago. Because his sons were working in Biharsharif, he had shifted there to live with them. If he had opted to stay in the Amalpur, there would be no one to take care of him. So they kept the house locked most of the year, and visited the village only

occasionally to check up on agricultural production and celebrate these festivals. It was only on occasions like this that he saw his kinsmen in his ancestral village.

As we turned for home, with my house finally again in view, I was well past full. But there was one house remaining. At the twenty-second and final house of the night, even though we were well passed the point of desire, we manage to consume the few last bites of *prasād*. As with the previous twenty-one homes, our presence and our counterparts' hospitality enabled a moment of mutual recognition. For both the hosts and visitors, there was an exertion, a small sacrifice, made on behalf the other.

The next morning, I saw clearly the stakes of what had transpired the previous night. As I stood in the lane with my neighbors, Arun Kumar approached Dinesh. The two men, both in their 60s, were kinsmen and had grown up together in Amalpur. They had known each other their entire lives.

"I didn't see you last night, Bolli?" Arun bellowed, using his nickname. "Why did you refuse to eat *prasād* from my house?"

I had myself seen Arun on our rounds the previous night with Dinesh, so it was not clear to me if he was joking. If he had indeed snubbed his neighbor, it would have been taken a grave insult. Much more likely was that the two men had somehow missed each other in the hustle of the night.

Dinesh replied without hesitation: "Oh, I was certainly there! I was searching for you, too. I ate *prasād* and drank a glass of water, too! I saw your brother. Bhopal was there as well. You must ask them."

And with his forceful response, the matter was put to rest.

Prasād Preparations

The next afternoon, on the third day of Chhath, Urmila Devi, her daughter Anita Kumari, and her three daughters-in-law were busy preparing *prasād*. Urmila, 55, was an industrious, laconic woman who tended to strictly follow religious dictates. She was, after all, a Brahmin matriarch, and her husband was a respected priest (*paṇḍit*) in the village. Her joint family household lived in the imposing two-story blue building in the southwest corner of the village. Approximately fifteen people inhabited five bedrooms. Each day, from dawn to dusk, Urmila worked with her three daughters-in-law to prepare food for the family. They owned five *bīghās* (two hectares) of land, and a cow to provide the family with milk. Beyond their house, and the small grove behind it, rows of paddy stretched into the distance. That afternoon, the open-air courtyard on the second floor of their house buzzed with activity as Urmila and the other women prepared the *prasād* to be offered to Surya Bhagwan at the river that evening.

While South Asian religious studies scholars have tended to focus on acts of worship and encounters with the divine, attending to the preparations for these celebrations reveals the sociality, labor, and forms of care that people pour into these events. Examining the lengthy efforts that precede ceremonies demonstrates how families marshal labor and resources for these events. Despite their fasts, the sociality of these preparations adds joy and meaning for the women during the festival.

Urmila Devi's son Rati estimated that family had spent Rs. 8,000 (US \$133.33) on Chhath Puja that year. It was no small amount; Rati's older brother, Rajani earned only Rs. 6,000 (US \$100) each month at his sales job in Biharsharif. But it was the main festival the family celebrated, and it required a sizable expense. For this occasion, Urmila's brother-in-law was visiting with his family from Allahabad, in neighboring Uttar Pradesh. Along with these

returning relations, friends and relatives from the village were also involved in the preparations. Bhaskar, a close friend and neighbor, and Lalita Kumari, a cousin who lived around the corner, had joined them for the festival. During the worship, they would add their family's baskets to those of Urmila's family. Other neighbors were sure to attach themselves to Urmila's party at the *ghāt*. These acts of coming together reflect the collective ethos of the festival, and point to the ways that the notion of family itself was flexible and variable over time.

Seated on small stools, the women were in the process of producing a special type of *prasād* known as a *ṭhekuā*—a *pakvān* (fried delicacy) made from wheat flour and jaggery. They were making several kilograms of these cookies, which they would then offer to Surya Bhagwan during the sunset and sunrise worships. After completing the second ceremony the next morning, they would distribute and consume the treats.

Lalita, an unmarried woman in her early 30s, crouched in front of a heavy pot perched on a makeshift stove that they had assembled that morning out of stray bricks for the occasion. Next to her, her mother and Urmila Devi sat on low wooden stools (*pirā*). Working from two wide bronze bowls that they used on religious occasions, the women mixed the dough and prepared it for Lalita. Once they were ready, Lalita dipped each oblong piece of dough into the bubbling pot of mustard oil, stirring so that they did not stick. After a few minutes, she used a spatula to extract them, setting them aside to cool.

I asked her if she said any prayers as she labored to produce these sacred offerings. She shook her head. “You don't need to recite any mantras. You just need to attend to god in your heart,” she explained.

While these woman prepared the *ṭhekuās*, Urmila's daughter Anita sat with her three sisters-in-law preparing *sabzī* and greens (*sāg*) for the family's dinner later that evening. As they

worked, sorting through spinach leaves and peeling potatoes, they joked with one another. They passed small children between them, and to the children's fathers and uncles who were seated nearby.

Anita Kumari had returned to Amalpur, her natal village (*māykā*), from the village where she lived with her husband and children. This was my first time meeting her. Although she was married, she had not changed her second name from Kumari (princess) to Devi (goddess). When I asked why, they explained that because she had a position as a schoolteacher, it would be too onerous for her to change the official documents and school certificates and listing her accomplishments. Her appointment was through that name, and she did not want to create any difficulties for herself by changing it.

“In India, we have patriarchy (*pitṛ-pradhān*),” she observed, turning to me. “In your country, is there matriarchy (*mātā-pradhān*)?”

For married women like Anita, Chhath is a prime opportunity to visit one's natal village. Because of the demands of running a household, restrictions on women's movements, and the expense of travel, such a reunion might happen just once a year.

Sitting in a nightie, a casual garment not considered appropriate for one's in-law's house (*sasurāl*), Anita was relishing her trip home. She could spend time with her mother, hold her growing nieces and nephews, and tease her sisters-in-law. The three women seated beside her had married her brothers, and they bantered as they worked. Anita wryly observed that her sisters-in-law were often fighting with their husbands—her brothers. In a sense, this was a playful struggle over who truly belonged in this house. But for all that this was her natal village and family, she had also become an outsider in the everyday life of this house and family.

“Well, this one,” Anita said, gesturing to Shamta Devi, the wife of the youngest son in the family, “She didn’t even have an arranged marriage. She met her husband at a country fair in Rajgir!” Rajgir was a popular destination for local tourism, with an annual fair that attracted scores of visitors each year.

“What a filthy thing to say!” Shamta cried.

Their antagonism, such as it was, was gentle. I had not seen the household so lively.

As the preparations wound down, they began to pack the *thekuās* into baskets to take to the *ghāt*.

“The *prasād* looks tasty,” I observed.

“You’ve said a sinful thing!” Anita admonished me, laughing all the while. “We have to wait until tomorrow to eat. Too bad!”

Worship at the River

The climax of Chhath Puja is framed by two complimentary worship ceremonies: the sundown offering (*sandhyā ārghya*) and the sunrise offering (*ushā ārghya*) the following morning. On these occasions, devotees travel to a nearby body of water to offer prayers to Surya Bhagwan. At this time, families focus attention on the Chhath *vratī* who was fasting, typically the family matriarch. She is the one who took on the physical and emotional burdens of caring for the family. She is the one who asked god for a bountiful basket to feed their family in the coming year. She does not eat at all on the third day, only breaking her fast after the completion of the sunrise prayers the fourth morning. Although the Chhath *vratī* assumes these austerities and restrictions on her diet for the duration of the festival, she does so with the support of her family. Chhath is a collective endeavor; few people celebrate alone.

In the hours leading up to sunset, Urmila Devi's household bustled with activity. I returned in the late afternoon, freshly showered, as instructed. Everyone had bathed and dressed in their best clothes for the trip to the *ghāt*. The women fussed over the children—dressing them in their finery, combing their hair, putting on their shoes. The children's energy added an air of anticipation. They rarely had the opportunity to leave the village. They visited the market, only a half-hour's walk from Amalpur, just a few times a year.

“Did you add the *sindūr* (vermilion powder)?” someone cried. The rest of the household rushed about as they packed up all the things needed for the *pūjā*—the *prasād*, the baskets, the vessels, etc. They raced up and down the stairs, checking that they not forgotten. Looking at the sun sinking across the fields, I realized that with these delays we would arrive after sunset. No one seemed concerned with the technicality. The family had reserved an auto-rickshaw for the occasion, as the small children could not walk the distance to the river. So they sent the children and most of the merchandise down to the idling cab. It took multiple trips to ferry all the people and stuff associated with their party to the *ghāt*.

The family conducted their *pūjā* at the *ghāt* of the Mohane River, a tranquil stream that ran through their fields and along the eastern edge of the nearby town, roughly two kilometers from the village. On this sacred occasion, many people walked the distance barefoot with their offerings as a sign of their devotion. I set off on the road with Rajani, Krishan Kant, and a few other neighbors. They walked barefoot, carrying on their heads a basket (*tokarī*) wrapped in cloth and filled with the *pūjā* merchandise. Rajani kept his back straight and marched ahead at a steady pace. I walked beside him, wearing shoes, talking to him about the meaning of the festival. We walked down out to the main road, made a left at the primary school, and continue past the

power station. On both sides of the road, fields of paddy, almost ripe, stretched to the trees in the distance.

Rajani said that walking barefoot did not cause him any discomfort. It was a small penance. The festival, after all, prompts much more considerable pains from those who had experienced distress in the past year and were petitioning god for redress. It was a reminder that, for some, Chhath Puja is not a celebration of family unity, but a time to beg release from health problems and financial struggles, to lessen the sorrow of untimely deaths. For the majority of people, those who had not experienced any extreme hardship during the year, the festival is nevertheless an opportunity to take a break from the monotony of everyday life.

That evening, the road to river was filled with small groups of pilgrims like ours, walking east toward the water, with many carrying baskets on their heads. In the fields, long lines of colorfully dressed people snaked their way through the fields toward different spots on the river, wherever they might find a level bank. While many devotees travel to pilgrimage centers renowned for their auspiciousness, any small body of water can suffice. Given the expense and disruption of traveling to Baragaon or the Ganges, many devotees instead flock to local rivers and streams. In a few cases, residents of Amalpur who strictly enforce patriarchal norms dig a hole in their front yard, fill it with water, and take the holy bath there. At least one family from the village creates a bathing space in the courtyard inside the house itself. This enables them to observe the festival while keeping the women in the home. They consider this just as efficacious, if less fun.

The *ghāt* is the most popular *pūjā* site in the immediate area, attracting several thousand people from the surrounding villages. Rows of blue and yellow streamers fluttered in the breeze. Spectators line the narrow bridge crossing the river, watching the festivities below. Above the

ghāt stands a recently constructed temple (*mandir*) of Surya Bhagwan. It is a modest structure, whitewashed and tiled, that sits silent for most of the year. But on this day it is open, the temple bells ringing constantly. Bhojpuri folksongs boom from the loudspeaker set to the maximum volume.

The steps leading down to the river on both sides were already crowded when we arrived. I removed my shoes at the top of the steps. During most of the year, the *ghāt* sits empty—only useful for the occasional woman smacking laundry against the concrete, or young boys flinging their bodies in the river on a hot day. But during Chhath the place is thronged, as dense as the banks of the Ganga in Banaras. Unlike the idyllic photos of the worship (*āratī*) that graced the pages of the newspapers, people jostled for space.

The rest of the family had arrived ahead of us in the auto-rickshaw. The steps were packed with bodies and baskets so that each step down to meet them required careful planning. All about us people were buzzing—unloading their bundles, lighting incense, and waiting for the rest of their family members to congregate. The women loaded their winnowing baskets with their various *prasād* items—fruits like apples, coconut, tiny bananas, and bulging melons; vegetables like pumpkin, radishes, and bitter gourd; stalks of sugarcane; mango leaves; and the *thekuās* wrapped in newspaper that they had made earlier that afternoon. These rectangular baskets of woven bamboo, with one end open, are newly purchased for this occasion. After the festival, they would put the baskets to us in kitchens and threshing floors, separating pebbles from rice, and chaff from grain.

The party assembled. Without a word, Urmila waded into the water, dunking her head beneath the surface. When she completed her bath, she stood to face the setting sun. Her

daughters-in-law placed the baskets in her arms. Rajani positioned himself behind her. He braced his mother, almost cradling her in his arms, distributing the weight, eager to lessen her burden.

Then came the *jal arpan*, the offering of water to Bhaskar. Devotees gained merit through this act. All of us in Urmila's party – her family; the cousins, neighbors, friends that had helped with the preparations; the neighbors that had attached themselves to the group at the *ghāt*; and I, the visiting anthropologist – crowded around her. Someone held up a *loṭā* above the basket. We all reached out, arms outstretched, so as to have a hand, or at least a finger, on the vessel. The water dribbled slipped slowly – as slowly as we could manage it – just beyond the front lip of the basket. At that sacred moment, we were connected, through this act, to each other. We repeated this several times, making sure to bless each of the many bundles.

After these rites, Urmila took a prolonged cleansing dip in the water. In the middle of the river, a line of older women dunked themselves, the ends of their saris floating behind them. An old man swam by unhurriedly. Compared to the crowds on the *ghāt* and the bridge above, there were just a few people in the water, which was quite chilly in the November night.

Then Urmila and her family visited the Surya Bhagwan temple, propitiating the gods, ringing the bell, and circuiting the interior of the structure. They then stopped at the *havan kund* (sacred fire), taking *darśan*, a viewing of the divine. Once those tasks were completed, they retrieved their bundles and headed home.

It was well past dark by the time we returned to the village, but Urmila Devi had not yet fulfilled all her obligations. She could not travel outside the village for *pūjā* without also propitiating the local gods and goddesses upon their return. So I joined the party with Urmila, Anita, Rati, and a handful of other family members. Walking along the darkened road, we stopped first at the Maa Jagdamba temple at the entrance to the village. Maa Jagdamba is another

name for Durga, one of the most popular deities in the village. We waited as Urmila bent before each of the idols, lighting incense, saying prayers, and accepting their blessings.

Then we proceeded to a temple located in the far northwest corner of the village. I lit the flashlight on my cell phone as we walked down the cobbled lanes, avoiding muddy puddles and groaning buffaloes. Unlike the Maa Jagdamba temple, which was an open-air set of shrines beneath a banyan tree, this temple dedicated to Devi Mata was a tiled structure with a locked inner sanctum temple. As Urmila Devi knelt before each of the idols, Rati shined a flashlight for his mother so she could see. She placed *prasād* before each of the seven *deviastals* (seats of the gods) and applied a *tilak* to each of the idols. Then she visited the *deviastal* outside of the temple, including the one called *gal-devta* by the well. With these rites completed, she could retire for the evening.

Conclusion

I have argued that Chhath provides a lens onto the making and remaking of extended family ties and regional identity. Both these forms of belonging operate at an intermediate level. The extended family is not the nuclear or joint family unit, nor the village. The region is neither the local, nor the nation. It is something in the middle.

Perhaps because of this intermediacy, the concept of region is hard to define. What are the boundaries and limits of the region? Does it pertain to Bihar as a political entity? Is region as broad as Nalanda district, or as narrow as the area surrounding to Amalpur? Or is it a sense of connection to other Magahi-speakers? Is Bhojpuri, a closely related language, included as well?

My neighbors in Amalpur did not concern themselves with these questions. Just because the concept of region is fuzzy and difficult to demarcate, however, does not mean that it is not

deeply felt or filled with meaning. During Chhath, Biharis produce a sense of regional belonging through numerous activities—by traveling to one’s natal village, by preparing *prasād* from particular foods with kin and neighbors, by walking to the river with a basket of *pūjā* items, by listening to Bhojpuri songs that have themselves circulated throughout the region, and by propitiating village gods upon one’s return. It is through these emplaced practices and material items, repeated year after year, that a person felt herself or himself to be Bihari.

Chhath’s enduring popularity in Bihar also reflects the ways that people experience the precarity of rural life, and strive to care for their families in response. The ripening fields of paddy, the overflowing winnowing baskets, the unending *kaṭorīs* of *kheer*—all of these symbolize the promise of abundance in a land of scarcity. Devotees undertake austerities at times of hardship and suffering. But even for those who have not experienced loss in the previous year, as Urmila Devi’s family and neighbors had not, Chhath still offered a release from the accumulated frustrations, large or small, that vexed them in the past year.

In their prayers for abundance, Chhath is festival in which devotees enacted a form of care that refuses scarcity as an organizing principle. For a few days out of the year, Biharis suspend the constraints on money and time that structure their lives. The festival also represents a break with everyday exigencies that order social connections in the village. It is thus a chance to re-enforce and extend ties beyond the household unit, with friends and relatives within the village. Amidst the bustle of their lives, it is a moment to devote proper attention to the people, foods, objects, and deities that compose their world.

Chapter 7

Building Beyond the Bypass Road: Urbanization, Ritual Eating, and the Fate of the Joint Family in Patna

At the party, held on a sweltering night in late May, several dozen people gathered on the rooftop of a newly constructed house in Patna, the capital of the Indian state of Bihar. The houses was located in South Ganesh Nagar, a peripheral but burgeoning neighborhood built to the south of the Bypass Road, the east-west artery that, in the not-so-distant past, separated the city from the rural world beyond it. Such distinctions were now much less clear. For the most part, the attendees at the party that night were not residents of the city, but hailed from Amalpur. The hosts of the party, the joint family household headed by Dinesh, had decided to build a house in Patna. This was their *gr̥h praveś* (sometimes transliterated as *griha pravesh*), the Hindu house consecration ceremony and house-warming party conducted whenever a family enters a newly completed home for the first time.

Earlier that the day, Dinesh's eldest son, Gopal and his wife Rajnu Devi had completed elaborate Hindu rites (*pūjā*) necessary to sanctify the new house. Once night had fallen, they honored their guests – relatives, friends, and caste fellows from their village – with a feast on the roof. The people ate and chatted and laughed long into the night. At the height of the Bihari summer, about a month before the onset of the monsoon rains, when the sun beats down for weeks on end, there was a collective sense of letting loose on this special evening. This was an auspicious day on the Hindu calendar, and fireworks from other celebrations across the city boomed in the distance.

After the dinner service was complete, two caterers carried a heavy Styrofoam box up the

stairs and began to distribute its contents. Children, and then adults, pressed around the men, eager for their turn. Soon each person was enjoying a paper plate of rich, creamy ice cream. For those from Amalpur, a village without refrigeration or much disposable income, this was a rare treat. The party grew more frenzied as the guests, delighted, returned for a second plate, and then a third. But there was no danger of running out of food. The hosts had spent more than Rs. 5,000 (US \$83.33) on the ice cream alone, nearly as much as Gopal's monthly salary. Yet on this night, as he accepted the congratulations and good wishes of his guests, his face betrayed no anxiety about the expense. For the family, the feast was a celebration of a momentous occasion, the culmination of work that had been months, and even years, in the making.

What were the forces that prompted such an undertaking, and what were the consequences for the ways they organized family life? In this chapter, I examine the *grh praveś*, and the months of preparation leading up to it, as a lens onto urbanization as a set of practices and aspirations that are transforming North India. This process of urban migration has implications for the way that the family configured their household. Because they needed to maintain ties to both the urban and rural spheres, their joint family household would be transformed into a non-cohabitating entity. Throughout this process, I highlight the ways that food practices elucidated the stakes and mediated the tensions bound up with these transitions.

Dinesh's family was just one of many laying the groundwork for a new, urban existence. Indeed in the next house on the block, and in the house next to that, the inhabitants were also conducting *grh praveś* ceremonies on that very night. Earlier that day, in a plot at the far end of the block, the property owners sat on the ground and conducted a *pūjā* to ensure an auspicious house construction process. The plot was demarcated by a brick boundary wall, but otherwise was just a bumpy patch of rough land, overgrown with weeds. It seemed as if South Ganesh

Nagar was springing to life before our eyes. And what was transpiring on this lane was happening throughout the neighborhood, and in the adjacent neighborhoods south of Patna's bypass road, and in many other burgeoning cities in India.

Much of the discourse on Bihar, both scholarly and popular, has centered on the state's chronic economic and political stagnation (Das 1992; Witsoe 2013). Yet over the past decade, Bihar's economy has grown at one of the fastest rates of any Indian state, at times posting growth rates as high as 15% per annum (Pandey 2011). Likewise, although historically one of the least urbanized states in India, the growth of Bihar's urban population has recently accelerated. The population of Patna, for instance, jumped 22% between 2001 and 2011 (Government of India 2011). So who are these new entrants to middle-class, urbanizing India, and how do they make their journey?

Scholars have identified urbanization as one of the primary forces transforming South Asia in the twenty-first century. Yet much of this literature focuses on the rapid expansion of the India's largest metropolitan areas, such as Mumbai and Delhi. Much less attention has been devoted to the growth of so-called "Tier II" cities, such as Patna, that serve as regional hubs, or to the many smaller district headquarters and towns in the hinterland. Furthermore, much of the anthropological literature on urban India examines illegality, infrastructure, and conflicts over public space (Kaviraj 1997; Tarlo 2001; Roy 2009; Anjaria 2011; Anand 2012; Chattopadhyay 2012; Shatkin 2014; Weinstein 2014; Björkman 2015; Finkelstein 2015; Srivasta 2015). Given this lens, the scholarship tends to emphasize confrontations between subaltern groups and the state, and the plight of those living on the margins (Breman 1996; Baviskar 2003; Chatterjee 2004; Rao 2010; Denis et al. 2012; Srivasata 2012; Björkman 2014).

By contrast, I focus on how members of the rural middle-class, people with comparative

more resources than the most desperate migrants, attempt to establish a foothold for themselves in the city. Urban migrants in South Asia are often portrayed in one of two ways: Either they are seen as temporarily residing in the city for short periods to earn money before returning to their village, or they are assumed to have moved permanently to the city, maintaining only a tenuous connection to their rural birthplace. Moreover, the literature on the urban middle-class focuses on the experiences of upwardly mobile people who are solidly ensconced in the city (Mankekar 1999; Fernandes 2006; Oza 2006). Less attention has been paid to the middle ground that includes sustained rural-urban linkages.

Writing about urbanization in Zambia, James Ferguson provides a model for conceptualizing the traffic between urban and rural spheres. Ferguson argues that against expectations of permanence, asserting that rural workers were much more mobile and transient than scholars have presumed (Ferguson 1999). Building on Ferguson, here I consider urbanization in terms of the multiple flows of capital, material items, foodstuffs, bodies, sensibilities, and aspirations. Urbanization in Bihar was not a single transfer, an irrevocable arrow pointing from rural to urban. Even for those committed to forging a new life in the city, this process was recursive, requiring countless movements back and forth between the village and city. The process was fraught and fitful, prone to unexpected delays and reversals.

This emphasis of the traffic between urban and rural has implications for how scholars study urbanization in South Asia. Instead of segmenting the anthropology of South Asia into a binary of urban and rural – with modernity assigned to the urban and tradition to rural – I trace the ongoing movement and exchanges between these two spheres. Instead of seeing rural and urban as static, disconnected categories, I show the ways they overlap and are interpenetrated. In doing so, I build on scholarly approaches that foreground the interconnections between rural and

urban (Williams 1973; Moore 2000). I draw on foundational approaches to modernization in India (Cohn 1971; Singer 1972), but reject urban modernity as a telos (cf. Rao 2009.)

In unpacking these movements, my work resonates with scholars looking at the messy boundaries between rural and urban spaces in Asia (Bach 2010; Harms 2013; Nguyen 2016). These scholars attend to the ways that rural people do not just inhabit the city but also actively create it. They do so in a way that rural habits, values, and bodies cannot be extracted from a putatively urban environment. Drawing on these approaches, this chapter focuses on one family situated in this in-between space. Dinesh's family aimed to establish an urban residence without forsaking their home and farmland in the village. Rather than being sited solely in an urban or rural setting, this ethnography moves with the people along the liminal routes to remaking the family.

Building a house and hosting a *gr̥h praveś* required intensive planning and resources over a period of months. Examining this process provides a glimpse into rural Biharis' idealized conception of family life, and the unavoidable compromises that reconfigured family life as a result of this move. Dinesh's notion of a good life, and an ethical life, was bound up with concept of a happy family. He often spoke to me about the "happy and complete family" (*sukhī sampūrṇ parivār*). This was a family that was financially secure, that did not face economic hardship. It was also a family in which relations between each member were peaceful and agreeable. Implicit in his invocation of a conflict-free family was the concept of the joint family household (*sanyukt parivār*). This was a family unit in South Asia in which multiple generations lived together in a patrilocal residence, pooling economic resources. A defining feature to this model was that brothers continued to cohabitate into adulthood along with their nuclear families. This remains the ideal in Amalpur, though poorer households tended to reduce their economic

entanglement earlier.

Dinesh's family had decided that relocating to the city was necessary for the well-being of their household. Unlike some other rural Bihar migrants, theirs was not a decision made of desperation. Rather, in attempting to establish a home in urban India, and gain access to the superior resources, infrastructure, and opportunities available there, they were striving to move on their own terms. They purchased a property and were developing it, ensuring a security for themselves that many other families could not afford. In this urban transformation, the ideal of the joint family was simultaneously threatened and sustained. They needed to reconfigure the joint family household into a non-cohabitating entity. To accomplish this, I show how different members of the family enacted forms of sacrifice on behalf of the family based on their position in the family.

But while the joint family was the locus of their aspiration, they were intent on doing so in a way that was seen as legitimate by the village community, and that maintained their deep ties there. After all, an important aspect of a happy family life entailed warm and generous relations with in-laws and other distant relatives. In this transition, friends and kin provided support through loans, advice, and other forms of assistance. Without that help, the move to Patna would not have been possible. The *grh praveś* was not merely about producing a livable house for themselves, but about performing – through the cultivation of physical space and bodies – their middle-class identity in an urban setting.

At every stage of this story of relocation and urbanization, the family's food practices illuminated their ambitions and struggles in navigating this process. After all, their inability to adequately provide for their family's future through agriculture prompted their move to the city. For farmers accustomed to self-provisioning, imagining an urban future for the family provoked

ambivalence: how to maintain access to foods that were wholesome, economical, and familiar, while also enjoying the opportunities the city provided. Given that this would be a non-cohabitating family, they had to figure out how to provision two households and balance domestic labor in a way that satisfied multiple people's interests. Over the course of this transition, I trace the role of food in everyday life and on special occasions. In doing so, I argue that what and how they ate in these different locations and moments illuminate an ethics of care within the family—whose interests were prioritized, and whose were taken for granted.

In addition to the substantial investment into the house and their urban future, the *grh praveś* ceremony itself was a focal point of the family's attention. They poured a significant amount of capital and time into making this event a success. A *grh praveś* was, along with weddings, funerals, and the major Hindu festivals, one of the major events on the social calendar in rural Bihar. It symbolized the family's transition to the new home. In addition to rites to sanctify the house, the family hosted a feast for their guests. This was the main arena in which they extended hospitality to neighbors and kin, and accrued prestige from that occasion. This ritual practice of extending social recognition to their guests continued the flow of goods and status through their community. Given their intertwined aspirations and anxieties, this was how the family legitimized its move from the village to the city.

Their concerns about eating well in the city centered on milk. This drink is a central part of children's diets in rural India, but its purchase from the market often raises fears about adulteration. In this chapter, I highlight the symbolic status of milk products in the *grh praveś*. The religious ceremony featured *panchāmrita*, a milk-based mixture of five auspicious foods. Its consumption made the new space familiar and reasserted the family's ties to the village community. Meanwhile, the communal feast that followed featured two unexpected dairy

products: paneer, a preparation curd cheese popular in South Asia but not widely eaten in Bihar, and ice cream. Although they were largely inaccessible in the village, as milk-based products they fit a familiar, nourishing paradigm. At the same time, serving these foods to their guests signaled the family's new middle-class aspirations to prosperity and claims a modern, cosmopolitan identity. Serving these foods, in other words, was a way of demonstrating that they were refined but had not forgotten their roots.

As they prepared for the festivities, the family made a number of sacrifices in their eating habits to ensure that the party would be a success. In contrast to the parsimony of their everyday lives in the village, both the ceremony and feast were rooted in an ethos of excess. This was evident in all aspects of the occasion, from the ritual prestations during the ceremony to the ice cream dessert. This sense of excess, of disrupting a life spent close to the edge, was considered an auspicious way to inaugurate this new phase of their lives.

The remainder of this chapter examines different stages of the activities for the *grh praveś*. In the next two sections, I examine the construction practices and financial arrangements that undergirded the house-building process. This was a major investment for the family, and it foregrounded the ambivalences about the move for the people involved. The following two sections consider the *grh praveś* itself, both the preparations for the day and the festivities. I highlight the ways that the rites and feast featured moments of excess that contrasted with the frugality of rural life. I conclude with a consideration of the way the move to the city prompted a reconfiguration of the joint family and their shared aspirations and expectations for the future.

Building Plans

My arrival in Amalpur ten months earlier coincided with my hosts' plans to leave it. At

the start of my fieldwork, I had selected this village as an ideal site to explore changing food and agriculture practices in rural Bihar. Many of my new neighbors, however, were thinking of a future beyond agriculture, and making a life for themselves in urban India. I had taken as my home in the village the front room of a two-room concrete building situated on the main thoroughfare. The structure was owned by Dinesh's family, and served as a *dalān*, a multi-functional room used by men to receive guests. Prior to my arrival, it was filled with long planks of wood. Dinesh's family commissioned carpenters from the next village to fashion into door and window frames for their new house in Patna. During my first days in Amalpur, when I was still a stranger to them, they insisted I add the *grh praveś* celebration on my calendar—to make sure that I was there to witness all these preparations come to fruition.

Dinesh's family was a joint family household comprised of six adults and five children. They were Bhumihars, members of the dominant caste of landowners in their village. Dinesh, in his early 60s, was an assistant headmaster at the local high school, having risen to the position after a long tenure as a teacher at the school. Compared with other men from the village, whose work took them on uncomfortable journeys far from home, Dinesh was fortunate to hold a government post that required a very short commute, each day cycling only to the school located at the junction of the main road. But Dinesh's sons had failed to secure a government job that was a marker of success. While Gopal worked as a representative for a beer company in Bihar Sharif, his younger son Bhopal referred to himself "unemployed" (*berozgār*), and was not able to contribute an income to the household. Instead, he remained busy running the family's small tractor business and taking care of assorted farming and household tasks.

Dinesh and his sons enjoyed living in Amalpur, and subscribed to the idea that a good life was the one lived in their native place (*mātābhūmī*), given the wholesome food, clean air, and

fellowship of family and friends. Yet their plans to build a house in Patna were nevertheless set in motion by a combination of broad economic trends and their particular family needs.

Although they owned and farmed five *bīghās* (two hectares) of land, and although it was able to produce enough rice, wheat, potatoes, lentils, and mustard oil to provide food for the entire family each year, they felt insecure about their future prospects. More to the point, they did not want their children to grow up to be farmers. Given the subdivision of ancestral lands and poor returns on staple crops, rural people in Amalpur widely considered farming as a path to deprivation. Instead, faced with increasing household expenses, they placed a strong emphasis on education and earning an income. Yet the poor schooling available in their rural region dismayed them. Students who attended the local government school often struggled to win a government posting. With a lack of economic opportunities in the area, many young men left the village in search of paid employment.

In response, Gopal placed the eldest of his three children in private school. Yet boarding all three of his kids would prove to be prohibitively expensive. Constructing a house in Patna, however, would allow all five children in the household – Gopals’ three and Bhopal’s two – to study in the city, where the schools were better, while still living at home. This would allow them to avoid the costly school fees and provide them with better food than they might find in a hostel.

Moreover, Dinesh’s wife had during the last few years suffered from a debilitating chronic respiration condition, one whose treatment required closer proximity to the qualified doctors and facilities available only in the capital. While Dinesh’s capacity to amass the resources needed to buy land and construct a house in Patna were rare for the village, their desires for the security and opportunity of an urban-based life were not. Men from most if not all

households in the village had moved to Patna for education and work, whether on a temporary or permanent basis.

The house in Patna was not the family's first attempt to establish a residence outside of the village. In 1991, Dinesh instead purchased a plot of land in Bihar Sharif, as a site for a possible future home in that city. But he was forced to leave the plot vacant because there was no pathway connecting it to the main road, and the family did not have enough money to construct a house at that time. Over the past two decades, however, the property, though untouched, had soared in value as the city's population grew. Nevertheless, it was an asset that they expected would continue to increase in value, and could be sold at a later date. But rather than pour more of capital in a small district city like Bihar Sharif, whose educational and medical facilities were far from first-rate, Dinesh and his sons decided instead to invest their money in the state capital, where the schools and hospitals were more reputable.

Purchasing the plot in South Ganesh Nagar cost 15 lakh rupees (US \$25,000), a substantial figure for the family. Two thirds of this amount came from savings. Roughly half of the remaining five lakh (US \$8,333.33) came from a bank loan, with interest to be repaid. The other half was covered via an interest-free "*friendship loan*" from Rajnu Devi's elder brother, a well-established man living in Ranchi, the capital of the neighboring state of Jharkhand. Even though the men in the household made the decisions about where to buy and where to build, the project would have been beyond the family's reach had it not been for Rajnu Devi's close relationship with her brother.

While it is atypical to hire an architect for structures built in the village, to complete this larger, more complex project in Patna, Gopal reached out to a friend, an engineer, to draw up the plans. Construction materials were more costly in the capital than they were in rural areas. Bricks

baked in the kilns surrounding Amalpur, for instance, cost half as much as those purchased in Patna. To save money, and to ensure the quality of the materials, the family purchased the bricks, cement, and sand locally and transported them to the site with their own tractor. Likewise, hiring local carpenters to complete the work in Amalpur allowed them to supervise the manufacturing of the door and window frames and troubleshoot issues as they arose. The finished products were kept in a storeroom for several weeks until they were ready to transport them to the city. Early one winter morning, Gopal and Bhopal carefully loaded the items into their tractor bed, securing them with ropes, before departing for Patna.

To supervise the on-site construction, Bhopal was increasingly absent during those months. Bhopal would set off for the bus stop with a small bundle of rice or lentils, staying alone in the half-finished house for days or weeks at a time. His wife Abhilasha Devi and two small children stayed behind. Bhopal returned to the village during the slack periods, for rest, camaraderie, and to restock his supplies. His routine was not dissimilar to that of other men from the village that traveled to Patna or other small cities in Bihar for study.

Some of these young men, however, were disparaged because they failed to show adequate devotion to their families. For instance, Ravi Kumar, a young man in early 20s studying engineering in the capital, earned this dubious reputation by stopping into the village for only a few hours. Sometimes, he arrived with a friend. His elder brother went out to the market to purchase chicken in their honor, a treat the family could afford to eat only once a month. Yet an hour or two later, once Ravi had filled his stomach and thickened his thinning wallet, he had abruptly departed.

Bhopal was different. Other young men from Amalpur found the village stifling and yearned for the buzz of the big city. But Bhopal, a sturdily built man with an easy smile, felt

most at ease in a rural setting. When it came to household chores, he did not shy away from getting his hands dirty. He was handy, too, often called upon to scale buildings and hang off rooftops to rewire electrical lines. The city, by contrast, confounded his efforts to find a job. With a college education and an upper-caste background, he dismissed wage labor as unbecoming. Yet he lacked the connections in Patna to find employment in the service sector. His social network was oriented toward striving but insecure young men like himself. His struggle weighed heavily on his mind, and often asked me, half-jokingly, to take him to America to find a job.

Whenever he came back to the village, Bhopal immediately changed into his sarong (*lungī*) and took his place among the neighbors and cousins who gathered in the lane in front of his house in the early mornings. The lane was so narrow that the men frequently had to slide to the side whenever a truck or bullock cart passed by. Quick-witted and jocular, Bhopal reveled in the banter and male sociality of these sessions, in which men shared the newspaper, stories, and gossip. Bhopal returned home with information—about expenses, vexing encounters with contractors, and a perspective on life in the capital.

One morning, a farmer from a nearby village passed by on his bicycle, selling the long white radishes that he had grown on the plot in front of his house. The men called out to him, asking the price. “Eight rupees (US \$0.13),” he replied without stopping, giving the price for one kilogram. The men scoffed, waving him on.

“In Patna,” Bhopal cautioned, “the rate is 20 rupees (US \$0.30) per kg.” People in Amalpur regularly complained about rising food prices, but Bhopal’s recent stint in the city had reconfigured his expectations about what was expensive. For breakfast in Patna, he typically ate some nuts and roasted chickpeas. This was far from the complete, nourishing meal of *roti-sabzī*

and milk that his wife and sister-in-law spent hours preparing for the family each morning. His efforts at cooking meals for himself on a makeshift stove were modest, haphazard. He had neither the training nor the preparations for it.

Moreover, the freshness of food in the village, and the knowledge that vegetables had been pulled from the ground not long before, was not something one could purchase in Patna, at any cost. As Bhopal saw it, one of the main challenges of city life was the high price and questionable quality of the food. It cost him Rs. 40-60 (US \$0.67-1) per meal in a restaurant, substantially more than what it cost to feed the 11 people in his household each day.

“The owners there put the vegetables in the fridge,” he explained. “Yes, they remain cold throughout the day. But they also lose their taste.” Refrigeration was unavailable in Amalpur, given the constant power outages. “The bigger problem is that instead of freshly ground spices, they use packets of spices that have been adulterated in the market. The same is true of the chai. It’s too weak!”

This reflects the ways that rural tastes, and the discernment about food and drink that had been honed in the village, collided with the realities of urban life. It was a common complaint. By habit, people in Amalpur were suspicious of any food purchased in the bazaar, whether cooked meals or uncooked foodgrains. They worried that the storeowner would dilute their product with inferior ingredients in order to make a profit. Their fear speaks both to the inadequacy of government regulation of food products, and to the low levels of trust in civic life in Bihar. Shifting the family to Patna would only further their reliance on unscrupulous traders.

For Bhopal, living in an unfamiliar city, in an unfinished house, apart from his wife and children and friends, and without home-cooked meals, was a sacrifice. He bore it without complaint. As a younger son who was not earning an income, overseeing the construction of the

house was a tangible contribution that he could make for his family. While less valued than steady employment, his presence allowed the project to progress while his father and brother were occupied. As Sarah Lamb notes, relations between family members in India are often characterized by acts of *sevā* (service). Lamb conceptualizes the family as a moral system in which transactions flow back and forth between parents and children (Lamb 2000, 43-45). There was an element of long-term reciprocity embedded in the system as children mature and care for the aging parents who cared for them when they were young. Bhopal's *sevā* was multi-directional in nature: helping his father and brother to construct the building that they had financed, while also preparing a home for his children to inhabit. Bhopal took a certain pleasure in fulfilling his obligations. But when he looked to the future, beyond the construction project, he was anxious about finding his place in the city. Indeed, as I demonstrate in the next section, Bhopal's older brother Gopal shared Bhopal's unease about the cost of living in the city in general, and the expenses associated with this transition in particular.

Building “*Tension*”

The original target date for the *grh praveś* was set for February. But construction delays forced the family to push back—first to March, and then to May, when, after consulting a priest from the village, a date both achievable and auspicious could be found.

One Sunday morning in April, I found the brothers seated on a bench, addressing envelopes. Gopal had the red and cream invitation card custom printed from a shop in Bihar Sharif. They were planning a large affair. They distributed the invitations in person to each village household and to Gopal's work colleagues (handing mine to me right then), and mailed the rest to their relatives and friends elsewhere.

A few days later, I sat with Gopal outside my house one afternoon. Gopal was a slim man, less outgoing than his younger brother, but with an easy-going nature and a quiet self-confidence about him. He was doing some maintenance on the tractor, and I kneeled on a nearby brick wall. He looked preoccupied, and I asked what was bothering him.

“However much our needs are, we fail to earn even that much. Don’t you understand? For this reason we worry. For this reason we feel stress,” he said, using the English word “*tension*” that has been adopted in Hindi as a catch-all term describing a range of worldly worries and is akin to the Western notion of stress. Gopal’s aspirations for his family could not be disentangled from the precarity of rural life. At work in the city, he was bombarded by the demands of his boss and clients. He returned home hungry, having eaten little during the day, but with more work to organize. As Dinesh aged, Gopal had assumed the responsibility for the family’s day-to-day finances. Like his brother, he was proud of fulfilling his “*duty*” (another English word he had adopted to signify his professional obligations), in providing an income and managing the household, but it was a burden as well.

The problem de jour was the admission fee for his daughter’s school in Patna. All private schools have different rates, he explained to me, and the more highly-regarded the school, the more costly the fees. It might range from Rs. 1000-100,000 (US \$16.67-1,666.67). This school cost Rs. 5,000 (US \$83.33), roughly one month’s salary for him.

“The time has come to pay up,” he announced, as he fiddled with the recalcitrant tractor part. At the same time, he explained, he was soon expected to repay the loan his brother-in-law had extended him. It would be difficult to do both.

This was largely an issue of cash flow—struggling to deal with a number of payments when little money was flowing in. A slowdown in the family’s tractor business during the off-

season had exacerbated their fiscal crunch. “This tractor has just been parked here,” he observed. It would be a few months before farmers would again plow their fields.

Nor could he take on other hauling work in the meanwhile, for he had no driver to do it. The driver they had hired from the next village during the previous winter was a part-timer, not a permanent employee. They could not afford to pay someone well enough to keep him on for more than a few months at a stretch. Once business slowed, the driver left for another opportunity. Moreover, it seemed that whatever revenue they had generated by plowing their neighbors’ fields had been erased by rising fuel and labor costs. And then there was the loan on the tractor itself, purchased six months earlier, to consider as well.

“Doesn’t your father receive 40,000 rupees (US \$666.67) each month in salary?” I asked.

“He does,” Gopal replied, calmly setting down his wrench. “But all that money has been spent on the new house in Patna. Everything has been committed there. My salary, too. You know the *grh praveś* will be next month. After the arrangements, there’s no money left.”

This year, Gopal’s family sold the surplus from the paddy harvest – once they had stored away a year’s supply of rice for the house – to the trader on the main road instead of selling directly to the government. The government offers a better rate, Gopal explained, but it can take some time to receive their payment. With so many pressing needs, they needed the money immediately.

“It’s a stressful time for you,” I said, referring again to the “*tension*” that Gopal had complained about.

“It will lessen. In a few months, our financial situation will improve. Once the children have shifted to Patna, I won’t have to pay the school fees and board for Mittu,” referring to his eldest son, who was studying at a private school one hour away. “And the house will be

finished.” He paused for a moment, gazing up at my house, the *dalān* that his family completed five years earlier.

“It’s just like when you arrived,” he told me, apparently referring to my initial sense of discomfort upon reaching the village and how it had since dissipated. I was not ready to agree with his assessment of my first days in Amalpur, but Gopal had moved on.

“Even with stress there is happiness in life, too.” Despite the expense, the *grh praveś* would be a major achievement for his family. Biharis considered these sorts of rituals the happiest occasions. The event reflected not only the family’s wealth and bright future prospects, but also their collective capacity to organize it. Many of their fellows from Amalpur might talk for years of grand plans, but their family had accomplished something. The party would be a celebration of what they had done together.

“The worst stress came last year,” Gopal said softly. “That’s when Papa was sick. He was sick for a long time.” This last part he said quietly, leaning in close to me, and then trailing off. The previous year, a few months prior to my arrival in Amalpur, his father, Dinesh, had suffered from a serious kidney ailment. While the worst of that illness had passed, the family still worried about him.

That day, Gopal did not give voice to his darkest worries, which I had pieced together over the previous months of fieldwork. If both his father and mother passed in the next few years – an unfortunate possibility given their declining health – then he and his brother would be left with neither his father’s salary, nor the pension that would be paid to his mother. Because both he and his brother had failed to find government postings, they lacked the security to which they had grown accustomed.

Joint family households are often subdivided when the patriarch passes away. Gopal and

Bhopal enjoyed a warm, cooperative relationship. But if in the future they disagreed, they might end up with just half the land and capital than they currently enjoyed. Such disputes were considered the most bitter and disturbing interpersonal breach that could occur. More frequently, however, these feuds concerned first cousins battling over their grandfather's inheritance rather than between brothers.

With the expenses associated with raising five children, such a future seemed daunting. Gopal and Bhopal's sense of precarity was informed not so much by the present expenses but by the possibility of loss and the difficulty of planning for the household in the future. For this reason, the house and the *grh praveś* stood as an expression of the family's unity and their ability to sustain themselves. Indeed the family considered this sense of unity not merely an idealized state, but essential to navigating unforeseen challenges.

Preparations

At 5 AM on May 19, the day prior to the *grh praveś*, there was a loud knock on my door. I opened it and looked down to find four young children – Gopal's children and their cousins – who had been sent to fetch me. “Hayden *uncle*,” they cried, “Come right now! The car is leaving!” The early morning departure was necessary because the single-lane road leading into Patna was often congested; the typical two-hour journey might be tripled in length as cars and trucks sit in a long line, motionless. This would be particularly true on this weekend, with so many weddings and celebrations scheduled for this auspicious date.

But in their excitement about the trip to Patna, the children had exaggerated the urgency of the departure. I turned the corner to find the family, and an assembly of interested neighbors, gathered around a Bolero jeep, debating how best to pack it. The vehicle belonged to Bhaskar—a

neighbor, kinsman (*gotiyār*), and close friend of Gopal and Bhopal. Bhaskar was a prosperous businessman, a contractor for road construction projects, and on this morning he lent his vehicle to help ferry the extended family to Patna to prepare for the occasion. As neighbors offered unsolicited advice, the brothers and Bhaskar spent the next hour and a half compressing all the merchandise for the party into the trunk of the jeep. Biharis tend to travel light, so my neighbors teased me about bringing along a carry-on sized suitcase for a two-day trip. For their part, they slipped their party clothes into a slim plastic bag, and could do without the rest. Because preparations for a full breakfast took several hours, Krishna Devi, prepared chai, *halva*, and *pakvān*—the sugar-heavy and easy-to-make breakfast Biharis typically consumed before long voyages.

South Ganesh Nagar, one of many residential developments located off the main bypass road, provided a snapshot of the dramatic growth underway in India's cities. The burgeoning neighborhood was laid out neatly in sectors, and the newly available land attracted middle-class families from outlying districts who wished to establish a space for themselves in the capital. The main road of the enclave was a narrow and rutted single-lane thoroughfare that extended several kilometers south. Even at this early stage of development, it often became choked with traffic. In some ways, the colony, as it was called, seemed like a suburb, with a halting commute into the city proper.

The built environment consisted, for the most part, of single-family houses, with many large four or five-story concrete buildings dotted in between them. The structures were packed closely together, but with freshly painted facades that reflected the capital these owners had poured into their futures. There were as many half-completed buildings as finished ones. Other plots remained vacant, like missing teeth in a whitewashed landscape. Construction materials –

bricks, iron rods, and mounds of sand – were heaped up on the side of the road. With projects in various stages of completion and others slated for development, the enclave’s atmosphere of energetic, haphazard expansion will likely remain in the years to come.

Bhaskar pulled up to a large *maidān* (public grounds) and parked the car. The broad, overgrown field before us was not altogether level, and occupied only by a pair of buffaloes grazing at one end. Located at the edge of this open space, the family’s new house had access to light and air that were unusual in the city. But I soon learned that this was not an official *maidān*, but an undeveloped parcel of land. In a few years, Bhopal lamented, there would surely be construction. A multi-story building might even tower over them. It was out of their hands. So too were the unpaved roads that made crossing a large drainage ditch impossible. We alighted at the far side of the *maidān*, unloaded the car, hopped over the ditch, and trekked up to the house.

The house was a sturdy, even imposing, one-story brick structure. It contained three spacious bedrooms (one for each of the nuclear families that comprised the joint family), two sizable common areas, a kitchen, a bathroom, and a storeroom. A staircase led up to the roof, a flat, spacious and usable space that might in the future accommodate more bedrooms. When I walked inside, however, I was surprised to find that the interior was unplastered, unpainted, and only minimally furnished. It more closely resembled a construction zone than a completed home. The wooden beds manufactured by the carpenters in the village months earlier had been positioned in each room, but there were not enough chairs for everyone to sit down. There was an electrical connection, but no working outlets. The concrete floors were unfinished, and a pool of standing water had collected in one of the common areas. Biharis often inhabit semi-completed homes as they wait to accumulate the capital needed to finish the work. Given their eagerness to move into the house prior to the start of the upcoming school term, the family felt it

necessary to take advantage of the auspicious date on the calendar and hold the ceremony at this time.

Bhopal seemed unfazed. He launched into the work of preparing the house for the party. An electrician was summoned. They worked feverishly, cutting electrical wires with their teeth, stringing lights from the ceiling, and hammering nails into the wall with the butt of their pliers. By the afternoon, three more workers had arrived, and set to buffing the floors.

In the midst of the excitement of heading off to the city and seeing the house for the first time, little thought had been given to what we might eat when we got there. The snack we had hurriedly consumed before departing was not much of a meal. Shortly after arriving, the children began to grow hungry. I did as well. Yet we soon discovered that there was no food available, nor a means of preparing it. Bhopal passed around some biscuit packets he had purchased from a nearby shop, and poured Sprite into small plastic cups—serving first Bhaskar, then me, then the children, and finally the women. While this was a welcome treat after a long journey on a hot morning, it did little to assuage our hunger. Eventually, Bhopal's wife prepared chai, and Bhopal brought a box of sweets from a shop around the corner.

For Ma, Bhopal's aunt, the situation was particularly vexing. As a woman in her early 60s, she had spent her entire adult life controlling the preparation and distribution of food in her household. Rather than enjoying a break from the responsibility, she grew anxious about the children. As a guest, all she could do was wait for her hosts to realize the extent of the situation. Growing impatient, she called me over.

“They haven't made any arrangement to feed us here,” Ma grumbled. “We might not earn as much as they do, but if this were our place, we'd be sure to have given them something proper to eat. How can you bring people here and then not serve them food? The lady of the house

(*mālkinī*) is just sitting there silently,” she said, referring to Dinesh’s wife, her sister-in-law. “The children say they are hungry. I had to beg for biscuits earlier. This is not right.”

In Bihar, the first tenet of hospitality entailed offering food to guests; indeed that was the point of the entire ceremony and party that would take place the next day. But the first batch of us that arrived by car that morning fell into a gap – both kin and guest – such that no provision had been made.

She beckoned me closer still. “Hayden *jī*, won’t you go and bring some food for the children to eat?” According to the customs and notions of respectability that prevailed for Bhumihar in Amalpur, women like her did not shop in the market unaccompanied. She typically deputized her sons for expeditions to the market, but they were not set to arrive until later. So she needed to send me instead.

I assented, heading off down the main road. I walked for a long time, but found little beyond the usual assortment of general stores, selling packaged chips and biscuits, and forlorn fruit stands. Restaurants in Patna typically either catered to businessmen and middle-class families, or were simple canteens for laborers. Neither type was prevalent in this neighborhood, positioned on the outskirts of the city. I returned with a bunch of bananas, more biscuits, *namkeen* (a salty packaged snack food, properly transliterated as *namakīn*), and a rather sad looking apple. It was all I could find.

I handed them over to Krishna Devi, and she slipped them into the folds of her sari surreptitiously, as if they were contraband. She inquired about the fruit prices in the market, clucking her tongue at my answers. Once again in control of the food supply, she gave the bulk of the bananas and snacks to the kids. She saved the apple for her daughter, and took only a single puny banana for herself.

The episode was a minor one, but it reflected the hierarchies and exclusions that occurred during the preparations for the event. Just as months earlier Bhopal had been sent off to the city to oversee the construction without much concern about his meals and general comfort, so too were our needs subordinated to the larger enterprise of organizing the party. Collective endeavors were often premised on the unacknowledged labor or exclusion of some family members. Although the function was framed as a triumph for the family, they could not all leave the village. Someone had to stay behind. After all, they had cows to look after, and a general fear of burglary in their absence. Because Gopal and Bhopal wanted their entire joint family household to be present at the function in Patna, they called one of their maternal cousins to come and stay in their house in the village for a few days. As Arjun Appadurai notes, maternal relations often have subordinate status vis-à-vis paternal relations in India (Appadurai 1981). Likewise, in Krishna Devi's household, she deputized Ramesh, her third eldest son, and Rima Devi, her daughter-in-law, to remain at home. They both told me that while they would have much preferred to be included in the festivities, they did not have a choice in the matter. But in order to extend hospitality toward esteemed guests, undesirable tasks were externalized onto those who are subordinated in the family hierarchy. If the *grh praveś* reflected Dinesh's family ethics of care, directed first toward the family itself, and more broadly toward the relations and caste fellows they welcomed with such hospitality at the party, then the absence of certain family members served as a reminder of the slights and exclusions upon which an enactment of that care depended.

The Ceremony

The *grh praveś* consecrates a new home, providing protection for the entire household.

The ceremony consisted of two parts, the *vāstu pūjā* (rites conducted on the threshold prior to entering the house) and the *vāstu shanti* (rites conducted before a *havan*, or sacred fire, lit in the interior of the house).

According to Rati Kant Upadhyay, a close friend of the family from Amalpur who assisted with the preparations, the ceremony was an important one. “It calls a god who has not come to this house before. It is as if you were registering your house with god,” he said, likening it to a bureaucratic requirement familiar to many Indians. As a Brahmin with detailed knowledge of the ceremony, Rati stressed that each aspect of the ritual furthers the goal of “providing a pleasant environment (*khus-hāl*) for the happy family.”

My conversations with the hosts and guests highlighted the concept of auspiciousness (*śubh*). Whenever I probed the reasons underlying particular practices, they often responded by saying that “it is auspicious to do these things.” They were following the customs and traditions (*rīti-rivāj*) that had served them and their ancestors well. Auspiciousness, in a sense, was both a means, and an end unto itself. Writing about house-construction in South India, Val Daniel notes that Hindus stress the need to harmonize one’s nature with the nature of one’s environment. In order to successfully bring about this alignment, Daniel details the rituals associated with selecting a suitable site, taking a horoscope, and inhabiting the structure, so to provide a safe environment for the family (Daniel 1984, 105-162). In a similar fashion, Gloria Raheja provides a detailed analysis of rituals in North India that highlights the concept of auspiciousness as central to Hindu thought. She describes how Hindus conduct rituals so as to remove the harm (or the potential for harm) that afflicts an entity (Raheja 1988, 37-43). For Dinesh’s family, too, to fail to perform these rites would be tempt misfortune.

The rites performed that day not only served to protect the family from harm, but to cast

cultural legitimacy on the house and, metonymically, the decision to move to the city. By demonstrating their fidelity to Hindu traditional practice, as they themselves define them, the family also reiterated their ties and their sense of connectedness to the village to which they belonged. One way they performed this connectedness was by employing a priest (*pujārī*) with ties to the village. Rati's father-in-law, Anand Pandey traveled six hours from his village to conduct the *grh praveś pūjā*. Nepali Pandey, another Brahmin neighbor from Amalpur, came to assist him. The night before the *grh praveś*, both men stayed up late setting up an elaborate array of offerings in the common area that had been designated as the site of the *vāstu shanti*.

On the morning of the *grh praveś*, Gopal and his wife Rajnu Devi set out with a coterie of relatives to offer prayers at a nearby temple dedicated to Ganesh. Meanwhile, Bhopal continued the work of cleaning the house and preparing for the party. He also supervised the work of the team of caterers that had arrived. In the other common area, they set up a makeshift stove powered by large cylinders of gas, so that two huge pots might cook the food. Then the men sat silently on the bench, rapidly peeling potatoes and rolling out dough to be fried.

An hour later, Gopal and his entourage returned to the threshold of the house to conduct the *vāstu pūjā*. As they approached, the entire group of family and guests already at the house assembled around them, craning for an unobstructed view. Gopal was dressed in a yellow *dhotī*, a traditional garment worn by men that consists of an unstitched cloth that has been wrapped around the legs and waist. His *dhotī* was knotted to his wife's orange sari, as it had been at the time of their wedding. In the *pallū* (loose end) of her sari, Rajnu Devi had also knotted a small amount of rice into the garment. This symbolized the hope that the house should always be well supplied, and never suffer from scarcity or shortage. On both of their foreheads, tied with string, were affixed a piece of colored paper (*paṭāpaṭī*) that was an auspicious marker (*śubh kā pratīk*),

designating the wearer as the *kām-karne-vālā*, the main performers of the ritual. On such an occasion, they considered it disrespectful to leave one's head completely uncovered.

At either side of the main gate was a clay pot (*kalās*), topped with a coconut, and covered with a red cloth. Rati explained that yellow, orange, and red were considered auspicious colors, while black was deemed unsuitable. Above the gate, Bhopal had secured a branch of a banana tree. In a bowl placed just inside the gate, two long fish, a representation of Matsya, an avatar of the Vishnu, swam in circles. Gopal and Rajnu Devi knelt at the threshold, lit incense, and propitiated the god of the gateway. From a brass plate arranged with sandalwood paste, a slice of coconut, a mango leaf, incense and two-rupee coin, the wife of a cousin applied a *tilak* of sandalwood paste to their foreheads.

Rati noted that lighting incense was a way of enticing god. "How can you please god? You can make the area nice and you can feed him sweet things. What else? You certainly can't please god by feeding him liquor!" he explained, chuckling at his own joke. This part of the ceremony reflected the larger concern throughout the *grh praveś* with an ethos and language of hospitality and entertainment of guests, both divine and human.

The couple, still knotted, entered the house and paused. Suddenly, Bhopal came in leading a cow, which he had borrowed from a neighbor. He put a plate of bananas and lentils on the ground before the cow, and she munched happily. Meanwhile, Gopal draped a yellow cloth around the animal and applied a *tilak* to its forehead. The cow urinated on the floor, an auspicious act given that in Hindu thought all products of the cow, including its dung and urine, are considered pure (*śuddh*). For the family, bringing a cow into the home was like bringing a mother into the home, and it was their responsibility to feed her.

With the rites at the threshold completed, Gopal and Rajnu Devi followed the priests

through the house and arranged themselves in front of the sacred fire (*havan kund*) to commence the *vāstu śanti*. The couple sat on a bundle of rice stalks in front an array of benches, which the priests had meticulously arranged with offerings of rice and fruit. The priests positioned themselves to one side, where they could direct the proceedings. Close at hand were brass vessels (*loṭā*) filled with milk and Ganga *jal*, holy water from the Ganges River. Nine flags represented the nine planets whose movements influenced the fortunes and misfortunates of man.

The rites lasted roughly four hours, and were a way of calling Shiva and asking him to let them live in peace. This ceremony was one of the longest that I witnessed during my fieldwork. Worship on festivals and other occasions, even weddings and protection ceremonies for newborns, did not typically last this long. Nor was Gopal or his family particularly devout. Gopal and Rajnu Devi carefully recited the Sanskrit mantras, following the priests' directions for each of the acts. On a few occasions, when the couple also grew distracted, the priests chastised them to pay attention, or to perform the task exactly as instructed.

Halfway through the ceremony, they adjourned for a break to stretch their legs.

“What do you think about when you are doing the prayers?” I asked Gopal.

He shrugged. “When at work, think of the boss. When doing *pūjā*, think of god.” It did not matter that he did not understand Sanskrit, and could not articulate the motivation or logic behind specific practices. To his mind, the most important thing was to perform the *pūjā* dutifully, according to the guidance of the priests. The many repetitions of the ceremony were in keeping with the broader logic of the *grh praveś* itself, in which ritual excess expressed their gratitude and hospitality to guests, both human and divine.

As the poorly ventilated room filled with smoke from the sacred fire, the rest of the party did not pay Gopal and Rajnu Devi any mind. The rest of the family considered the couple to

perform the ceremony on their behalf. Instead, they turned their attention to welcoming their guests. Throughout the afternoon, relatives and friends from across the city and beyond arrived at the house. Dinesh and Bhopal stood outside, greeting visitors, bending to touch the feet of those who were senior to them, and offering small cups of Sprite to each person. Meanwhile, the members of their extended family members who had assembled retired to different rooms of the house, where they sat on beds or on the floor and socialized. There they drank chai and snacked on a cardboard box filled with fruits and sweets as *prasād*, divine leftovers blessed by god. The children, for their part, delighted in the new surroundings, bounding through the house and onto the piles of construction materials outside.

Gopal and Bhopal had arranged a bus to transport the Bhumihar and Brahmin residents of Amalpur to the party. Such accommodations were standard whenever a village household hosted a major function. When the bus arrived late in the afternoon, after many hours of delay, I was standing on the roof with Rati. As they alighted, they seemed a bit uneasy at first, unsure of how to act in this new space. To my mind, it seemed as they were performing the role of the diffident guest, awaiting an enthusiastic welcome from their hosts.

But Rati had his own take on it. “They’re probably thinking, ‘How can I advance like this?’ They might be a bit jealous to see it,” referring to the house, which seemed imposing, even though it was unfinished. “They might feel a bit sad inside.” Even though the communal feast was a social mechanism for defusing jealousy, for some from the village, particularly those for whom such a house like this was well beyond their means, the house and the lavish party was an unavoidable reminder of just how far they had fallen behind their fellows.

The feast was the family’s way of acknowledging its ties to the village community, especially at a time when they were constructing a home beyond its borders. To neglect to invite

one's fellows was considered an insult. Likewise, to refuse an invitation without cause could cause a breach. In this area, proper etiquette dictated that at least one man from each household attend a village function. If there were multiple events on the same evening, then men from the household arranged it so that there is at least one representative at each function. An exception to the rule was made if someone faced an unavoidable work obligation, or someone has traveled out of the village for another reason.

As the *vāstu shanti* drew to a close, the guests filed into the room to take part in the Satya Narayan Swami *pūjā*. This was the worship (*ārati*) performed at the end of any task, when petitioners chant praise to Vishnu. At the chorus, the children shouted with glee. After the worship concluded, the hosts passed around small plastic cups with *pañcāmrit*, a milk-based mixture that includes five sacred foods—milk, curds, ghee (clarified butter), honey, and jaggery (coarse dark brown sugar). The sweet, frothy mixture had pieces of fruit floating within it. As a milk-based product containing various cow products and fruits that has received god's blessings, Biharis considered this one of the most nourishing drinks available and eagerly drank the *prasād*.

The Feast

Communal feasts tend to follow a set formula in Amalpur. Hosts sent invitations to all the households in the village. They hired caterers to prepare large quantities of vegetarian food. At least one representative from each household assembled on the appointed evening, when called from their homes. Guests were seated on mats in long rows in a common area of the village. Close friends and relatives of the hosts were conscripted to serve the guests. They rushed up and down the rows, loading guests' plates with scoops of *sabzī* (vegetables), huge helpings of rice and lentils, stacks of *pūrīs* (fried flatbreads), and multiple varieties of sweets (*mīṭha*). Daily

meals in the village typically consist of the same simple fare—*roti-sabzī*, *dāl-bhāt*, and milk. It was on festive occasions that rural Biharis felt license to indulge themselves. This was a treat because festive foods – in particular fried foods and sweets, which can take many hours to prepare – were not easy to cook in the home on a small stove, and people were reluctant to spend money on them when they travel beyond the village.

This feast deviated from the standard script in a few notable ways. First, there was a buffet food service on the roof of the house. Only the Brahmin guests were served in the traditional manner. They were served first and separately, as was customary. A half hour prior to the opening up the main buffet on the roof, Bhopal summoned the dozen or so Brahmins in attendance into one of the bedrooms. For the rest of the guests, the caterers set up the buffet table to one side of the roof. The party had the air of a meal at a midrange hotel, something that some of the men with jobs in the service sector might have encountered during a work retreat. According to Gopal, the buffet – or “buffer” as he called it – was more efficient. “You can serve 50 guests in the time it takes to serve 25,” he noted. This also helped alleviate the problem of having enough space for both food preparation and seating. It also allowed people to select what foods they wanted, reflecting a new ethos of personal choice. Although they opted for a buffet, relatives of the family took up positions behind each of the trays, thus preserving the sensibility and social logic of the feast in which the hosts accrued cultural capital by feeding their guests.

A second innovation was the appearance of paneer on the menu. Though it has become increasingly popular in cities and restaurants frequented by Biharis when traveling for business or to visit relations, I had never witnessed it served in Amalpur. Yet on trips out of the village, Gopal had developed a taste for it. For one thing, he loved all things made of milk. “If I could, I would only eat substances made from milk (*dūdh kī chīzen*),” he told me on several occasions.

“I’m just not as interested in other foods.” Indeed, on many mornings and evenings in Amalpur, I had wandered into his house to find him dipping a folded *rotī* into a stainless steel cup filled with milk.

As a young man, he had traveled to the city of Chandigarh, in Punjab, where he had worked and studied for a time. Paneer, a dish not widely produced or consumed in Bihar, was something he had relished there. One evening, while hanging out with Gopal and Bhopal watching TV, they had lingered for several minutes on an Italian cooking show, watching with amazement as the host made cheese pasta. When it came to this party, he selected the menu according to his tastes. But to serve paneer was not just a matter of personal preference. As with the buffet, these newly acquired tastes also reflected his aspiration to provide his family a more urbanized, less parochial existence. Similarly, Bhaskar Mukhopadhyay, writing about street food culture in Kolkata, has observed that the city is a space for asserting a national identity through food practices (Mukhopadhyay 2004).

While the paneer seemed in line with the wide-ranging menu of a buffet service, the ice cream came to the guests as a delightful shock. It was a special purchase organized by Gopal and Bhopal along with the sweets. The assembled guests, who had been respectfully enjoying the evening, were a bit diffident in this unfamiliar environment. But once the caterers brought out huge Styrofoam boxes filled with ice cream, the mood at the party grew more boisterous. An excited scrum crowded around, as the caterers could scarcely dish out the popsicles quickly enough. The vanilla ice cream served as a marked contrast with the uninspiring frozen ices that were sometimes available in Amalpur for Rs. 5-10 (US \$0.08-0.17), sold by a man pushing a handcart from village to village. On such a hot night, the children were especially excited about it. To them, the *grh praveś* was not merely a social obligation, but a celebratory event at the

height of summer. It was a respite from the roasting village, a rare chance to visit the big city. Everyone present, it seemed, indulged themselves with multiple servings.

It's useful to think about the paneer and ice cream with respect to Claude Lévi-Strauss's famous observation that cooking is the process of transforming nature into culture (Lévi-Strauss 1997). While milk is a beloved element of the rural Bihari diet, it would be unthinkable to serve it on its own at a formal occasion such as this. But transforming milk into *pañcāmrit*, paneer, and ice cream reflects the effort and care that the hosts directed toward their guests. Both the paneer and the ice cream, moreover, reflected the family's capacity to provide a special experience for their guests with high-quality food, thus representing what Pierre Bourdieu has described as a form of distinction (Bourdieu 1984). The reason that this menu plan worked – why it was not, in other words, seen by the guests as a foreign imposition, or strange extravagance – was that these items resonated with both the family's rural roots and also their aspirations for a prosperous life in the city. It was, in other words, a statement about both their origins and their ambitions. Moreover, as with the rites conducted earlier in the day, the abundance of dinner options and ice cream – enough for each guest many times over – reflected the ethos of excess associated with the occasion, one that contrasted with the parsimony and unfussiness of their daily lives.

As the ice cream service progressed, the guests retired in small groups, chatting contentedly. Throughout the night, Bhopal had been rushing up and down the stairs for hours, but his pace gradually slowed. Likewise, the nervous smile etched on Gopal's face – a feeling perhaps familiar to any party host – began to ease. Hosts in Bihar always worried about running out of food, but on that night there was a lot leftover. They had expected that 50 people from the village might attend, but only 25 ended up boarded the bus in Amalpur. This was due in part to the popularity of the day for social occasions—another household from the village also had a

wedding scheduled on this evening. It was also due to the distance from the village, and the fact that some of the men who worked in Bihar Sharif could not make it back to the village in time for the bus's departure. All this did nothing to disturb Gopal and Bhopal. They had fulfilled their obligations. With the guests properly fed and the rites complete, the day, even despite the relatively light attendance of friends from the village, was considered a success.

Given that this was one of the busiest days of the year for functions, the guests debated what the traffic conditions would be like on the road between Patna and Amalpur. On the trip up earlier that afternoon, it had taken the bus more than five hours to reach the house. So instead of boarding the bus at the end of the party – at the same hour that all the other celebrations in the city were ending – they decided that we would wait until late in the night, when there would be no traffic. As the party wound down, they rolled out mats and people drifted off to sleep on the roof for a few hours, as we had all done the night before.

The last thing I heard before drifting off to sleep was the voice of Dinesh's cousin, Sunil Sharma. "Look, he's become like us. He can just fall asleep on the ground."

At 1:30 AM, we woke and boarded the bus for the ride back to Amalpur. Given that it was school vacation and there was no reason to stay in the city, Gopal, Bhopal, and their families locked up the Patna house and returned home as well. After all the hype and franticness of the celebration, the next day was another languid day in the village.

Conclusion

This chapter considers one middle-class rural family's attempt to find a place for themselves in urban India. Instead of foregrounding the desperation of Bihari migrants, I emphasize the aspirations of those arriving in the city. Arjun Appadurai argues that aspiration is

better thought of as a cultural capacity (Appadurai 2004). Yet too often, Appadurai observes, culture is typically thought to concern the past, while economics is considered the realm of the future (Appadurai 2004, 60). Indeed, scholars often bifurcate their focus, with traditional ritual practices ascribed to rural spaces, and economic dynamism ascribed to urban locations. I have sought to disrupt this naturalization of the rural/urban divide by showing how future aspirations emerged from the rural sphere and required cultural legitimation in urban settings. This sort of aspiration is quite at odds with the celebration of the neoliberal subject in India's urban centers. At the heart of their plans was the ideal of the joint family household.

While constructing the house was an achievement that hinged on the collective effort of the entire family, its completion also raised new questions about what it means to belong to a joint family household in contemporary rural India. Because of their jobs and their fields in the village, the family could not forsake it entirely. Nor did they have any desire to do so. But they could not all continue to live there. The family would have to split. To remain a joint family household, they had to become a non-cohabitating one. Sustaining the family, they believed, required them to reinvent it as a social and economic formation rooted in multiple locations.

But how would they adjust to living in two places, three hours apart, rather than altogether, as they had done throughout their lives? The provisional plan was that Bhopal and his wife would live in the Patna house, together with all five children, who would attend school there. Dinesh's wife, would also join them in the city, so she could access the medical care she needed. Meanwhile, Dinesh and Gopal would stay behind in the village, close to their workplaces and their fields, along with Rajnu Devi. This would ensure that there was one man and one woman in each home. The family would reunite only during school vacations and religious holidays.

It was Rajnu Devi who experienced the biggest disruption. Her connection to her brother had enabled the family to build the house in the first place. But with her three children living in the city, there was little to do at home. In the months that followed, she often remarked on how quiet the house in the village had become. Dinesh and Gopal were at work during the day. All she had to do was cook meals for the three of them. While she approved of the children studying in better schools, and appreciated the lighter workload, the space seemed empty without them. Given that so much of a rural woman's life is framed in terms of her *sevā* as a wife and mother, what did it mean for her to lose that daily connection to her three children? But in a non-cohabitating joint family, what was the alternative?

In the long-term, the family envisioned remaining jointly located in the city and village, maintaining ties to their rural milieu. Their farm provided a form of security against urban expenses; they would always be able to eat well if they produced their own food. But they expected that the children would study in the city, and hopefully find employment there. They did not want them to work as farmers full-time, but they did not want them to forsake their farms, either. So they intended return to the village for festivals and weddings, as many other families did, and would eventually retire there. Even after completing the house and hosting the party, they anticipated that they would continue moving back and forth between urban and rural.

During one of Bhopal's return visits to Amalpur, I asked him how he and his family had adapted to life in the city. Had it been, as they initially worried, that people would not be as friendly as in the village, each ensconced in their own homes, watching their own TV sets? In Amalpur, I had observed that public socializing increased when the electricity was out, and there was no power for TV or the fan. Conversely, when the power was running, people stayed indoors and did not meet each other as frequently in the lanes of the village.

“Actually, it’s a lot like the village,” Bhopal replied. “In the morning, people in the lane meet each other and have a conversation, wearing their *lungīs*, just like we are doing here. The people in that neighborhood are all very *sharīf* (respectable). Everyone speaks nicely with each other.”

In an area filled other migrants like them, with similar hopes for their children and similar attachments to their rural ways and habits, they were not such strangers after all. Unlike the variegated population of the city as a whole, the people who could afford to purchase land and build a house in this area were more often than not people like them—migrants intent on converting rural advantages to urban ones. It made the city less anonymous and more familiar, more like the village.

“What about the supply of milk?” I wondered. In Amalpur, they drank the fresh milk from their own cow. How had they managed without theirs?

“We have no problem buying milk. And there’s no issue with freshness either. Some of our neighbors keep cows there, so we just purchase milk directly from them each morning.”

Chapter 8

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have examined the ways that rural Biharis care for their families at a moment when they feel insecure about their livelihoods. Rather than use an analytic of poverty, I have emphasized their sensations of precarity. Focusing on embodied sensations of vulnerability shifts the discussion away from objective measures of poverty and instead privileges the ways that rural people experience the uncertainty of everyday life. Bihar is a place with deep histories of scarcity and upheaval. At the same time, new vulnerabilities tied to broader economic changes have proliferated in recent years.

In particular, I unpack the accelerated capitalization of rural life and its effects on agrarian livelihoods. Land, seed, and labor were increasingly commodified, and increasingly costly. As such, farmers prioritize subsistence farming and value their ties to the land. But even with fully stocked storerooms, the reduction of landholdings across successive generations means that farmers must prepare for a future beyond agriculture. For most farming families, the imaginary of the peasant farmer is a fiction that cannot be sustained. In order to survive, the family has to be mobile, embedded in the urban economy. This changing relationship to rural life has implications for how people eat and how they live together in the family.

By situating this study in rural Bihar, I offer a new perspective on the policies of economic liberalization that has transformed India in recent years. The village provides a vantage point to observe people moving between the village and the city. Despite the rising importance of the city in the economies of the household, I show how the enduring importance of the village in

people's lives. At the same time, I trace the new upheavals and stresses that arrive in the village. These concerns center on losing the forms of rural security that they have traditionally enjoyed.

These transformations of the rural world have differentiated effects according to caste, one of the defining coordinates of social life in Bihar. Upper-caste people face a rising challenge to their dominance and security. Compared with previous generations, these small-scale farming families are more land-poor, even if their holdings remain above average. At the same time, they express resentment at their fading political control that makes it hard for them to access secure employment. This has resulted in the rise of majoritarian, rightwing political movements that feeds on this dissatisfaction and targets minorities as the source of social problems. The threat of rising lower-caste groups also provokes concerns about respectability and proper comportment of unemployed young men. Given the historical inequalities in land ownership and oppression of lower-caste people, caste is bound up with class. Lower-caste families are mostly marginal landholders and have little opportunity to accumulate land or resources. This makes it hard for them to access the healthful food that sustains the family. Many lower-caste families have migrated to urban areas that offer more opportunities for advancement. In this sense, people from all segments of rural society are preparing for a future beyond agriculture while still relying on the land for their sustenance.

Despite this pervasive sense of insecurity, I contend that life in Bihar is defined not by its anxieties or its fissures. Instead, I attend to their resilience in the face of these threats. In particular, I underscore the care practices that sustain the family. For rural people, this primarily entails the labor of growing and preparing food. Feeding the family is a means of ensuring the nourishment and satisfaction of loved ones. It is a daily enactment of their agency in the face of larger political economic formations they do not control. It also encompasses acts of

resourcefulness that seek to make the most of the surrounding environment at a moment of state neglect.

Rural people also think about care in terms of longer timespans as well. Care is framed in terms of planting crops for a coming growing season, an investments in a child's studies, and the construction of a house that would stand for generations. Rural people consider themselves the custodians of the lands and homes that they had inherited from their forbearers, and will entrust to the next generation. At the same time that they enact these practices of care, these practices also shed light on the forms of difference and exclusions that are produced within a family and community structures.

Recent scholarship on aspiration in urban India has centered either on the individual aspiring subject, or collectivized caste-based movements for uplift and agitations against the state. In contrast to these approaches, I emphasize the ways that aspiration in Bihar is grounded in and routed through a particular notion of family belonging. The family is the unit that lies at the center of people's concerns and desires for the future. While rural Biharis acknowledge that the joint family household is under threat, they also pose it as the solution to their problems. This turn to the family reflects the continued salience of those bonds, for both affective and economic reasons.

In tracing this interplay between precarity and care, between insecurity and enduring forms of belonging, I challenge conventional representations of Bihar as a place of desperation, hunger, and lawlessness. I push back against the totalizing discourses of neoliberalism and the flattening discourses about food insecurity. Even amidst precarity, Biharis experienced moments of satisfaction and pleasure. Indeed the balance of abundance and dearth shifted over time. These qualities coexisted within a single community, household, and even a single person.

In turning to the hungers and sensations of the body, I show the ways that people find ways to refuse the logics of scarcity that governed their lives. This is not a story of crisis points, or grand moments of resistance. Rather, I trace gradual and mundane experiences of labor and eating. This brings into focus the subtle exertions and changes that characterize everyday rural life: Cultivating the soil. Preparing dinner for the family. The rise and fall of grain in storerooms, and money in pockets. The halting preparations for a transition to city life. The investment in building materials to expand a house in the village. Collectively held, these activities reflect ongoing efforts to stabilize the family at a moment of insecurity.

* * *

During the final weeks of my stay in Amalpur, I often took an afternoon constitutional in the fields surrounding the village. It was the end of winter, and the weather was mild and pleasant. With the peas ripening, I often sat on the narrow earthen embankment separating Rakesh's field from his cousin's, indulging on snap peas. This field would provide tasty vegetables for weeks of stews served at breakfast and dinner, as well as many indulgent afternoon snacks. As a member of his household, Rakesh had insisted that these were my peas, too, and that I help myself to as many as I wanted.

With an entire field before me, I did not hesitate. This was, after all, one of the pleasures of rural life: raw peas (*kaccā matar*). Picking the peas right off the stalk, emptying them from their shells into the folds of my *lungī* (sarong), and popping handfuls into my mouth, as if they were candy. They had a subtle natural sweetness that was neither overpowering nor adulterated. Across the field, the sun set in the distance, smearing the sky orange. There was not much noise—the rumble of trucks on the main road, far off, the cries from a children's cricket match in the distance, the chirping of myna birds.

One evening, Rakesh came to sit by me. We sat there together for some time – shelling, eating, talking – as the sky slipped into the shades of evening and the air grew cooler. During my time in the village, I had seen the pressures of presiding over the household weighing on him: How could he earn enough to provide for the family? How could he properly educate his son and daughter so they might succeed in the world? Though only 42 years old, the hair above Rakesh’s temples was turning gray. Every week or two, I sat in the courtyard and watched as he dyed it black. Trying to staunch time.

Some of his neighbors had whispered to me that Rakesh was considering moving to a town in a neighboring district, to take a job as a private school teacher. This did not surprise me. One morning during the first days of my fieldwork, I had entered the house to find Rakesh sitting on the floor with Gopal. They were sifting through old documents as Rakesh filled out an application for a teaching position at a government school. I translated some of the English words on the form for him. Clearly, he desired a more stable job than his current position in sales. He had submitted the application, but nothing came of it.

To work as a teacher in a private school might pay a bit more than his current job. But a move would also absent him from his home in Amalpur. A cautious man, not given to speculation or bombast, Rakesh had not said anything about it to me. People in the village were often boasting about their plans. I did not expect him to—at least not until his plans were finalized.

Instead, as a small pile of pea shells had accumulated on the ground beside us, Rakesh mused about life in Amalpur. “If I could earn enough, I would rather stay here in the village and be a farmer full-time. It’s too much *tension* to commute to the city each day, and to deal with my boss there.”

What he did not say – what he and I both already knew – was that despite his upbringing in the village and his life-long experience cultivating the land, this was not a viable option. There were expenses for the household that required cash: school books and clothes and food and medicine. This money could only be earned from a job in the city. He was the only one in the household who held a salaried position, even though it was just a contingent posting with a private company. Turning away from the city would threaten the household as an economic unit.

Rakesh and I sat in silence for a moment, eating our peas. The discarded shells continued to grow at our feet. The pile was a material manifestation of what, despite all the stresses and the setbacks, he and his family could still do: turn soil and seed and water into something nourishing and enjoyable. It was an assertion that eating well was a question of pleasure, and not simply price or profit. That beyond the logic of the market, there were other ways to conceptualize value.

The field before us was a product of his family’s accumulated knowledge of the land and their toil. It was a materialization of a multitude of small acts of care over several months. But amidst that abundance, the pile of shells was also a reminder of the fleeting nature of these things. How quickly such efforts could be consumed and disposed of. How easily it could all vanish. Rakesh’s identity and his past were rooted here, in this field, and in agriculture. But at that moment, his future, and that of his family, hinged on success elsewhere.

As the last of the light faded, Rakesh stood, dusting off his *lungī*. He bent down, scooping up the pile of discarded pea shells, and scattered the evidence of our evening snack among the rest of the plants of the field.

“If you don’t do this,” he instructed me, “somebody might come along, see all the shells gathered here, and think that these were good to eat.”

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