

See the Masses, We Swagger

Masculinity and Escape in Modern Rural India

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ARAKU VALLEY, India — Ramesh was an anomaly of sorts, because he was an auto rickshaw driver who had a job. In fact, simply having a job was enough to be an anomaly in Araku Valley, an Indian version of the tribal reservation, where the government barely keeps track of whether babies survive their first year, let alone whether young people find work. But the fact that Ramesh saunters over to the Kinchumanda rickshaw stand after finishing his shift at the post office, a government job that could be passed on for generations like an heirloom? And that he openly identifies as a rickshaw driver, when he could have just collected his paycheck and reupholstered his life with middle class sensibility? *That* was not the behavior of decent, working people.

“When I’m at work I play that role,” he told me on one afternoon in January. “But when I’m here I’m one of the boys.”

At the rickshaw stand, Ramesh was in his element. The slender 29-year-old popped his collar and slipped a Bluetooth receiver over his ear, corralling the other drivers with the combination of fraternal banter and streetwise competence that he had mastered. They called him the Dance Master because he carried himself like a celebrity, and had, for over a decade, trained kids in his village in the art of break dance and swagger. Ramesh tended to speak in slow, non-committal sentences, drawling out the words as though he was constantly wrestling with ideas too profound for concrete expression. The guys at the rickshaw stand loved it.

Ramesh maneuvered his slender physique into the back of his auto-rickshaw, reclining back onto the linoleum seat and kicking his feet up over the cross bar. The gaggle of younger drivers who always followed him — perpetually hooded, their first beards still emerging across their lean jaws — snickered at this characteristic irreverence. Classic Ramesh. Multiple forms of employment meant that Ramesh was making more money than most people in this enormously impoverished stretch of central India where most people lived off of welfare and sustenance farming. He could be as irreverent as he liked.

“A villain in the house but on the streets a hero,” he teased Madhu, a teenager who responded to his wife’s pregnancy by offering melodramatic proposals to every young female customer that came his way.

“And in his underwear a zero,”¹ added Ravi, a chiseled 19-year-old who had been a driver for less than a year, but was admired for his tales of successful sexual exploits. The other drivers

¹ This is a bad translation from Telugu.

burst into jeers and mock Oh-No-He-Didn't expressions of shock. Ramesh, still reclining, swung his arm to grab a fistful of Ravi's sweatshirt, and goaded him to bet on a local volleyball game. "If I win," he said, "I get to fuck your sister."

"Sure," Ravi shot back. "If I win, I get your wife." Laughing, Ramesh shot up and pulled Ravi into a playful headlock.

"Oh you want to fuck my wife, motherfucker?"

I first met the Kinchumanda auto drivers in 2014, while researching indigenous life in Araku Valley, part of a 35,6000 sq. mile stretch of India's eastern hills that the government had designated as reserved tribal land. At first, witnessing how the innuendo-laden banter between the drivers melted so easily into physical affection, or how the boys' performances of swagger seemed directed as much at each other as at young women, I was tempted to read in the experiences of my own American boyhood, and imagined the chummy, homoerotic social order of a high school football team. But suburban America's (often white) young men move through life with a received rhythm, at first playing catch in the yard while avoiding girls, and then romantically pursuing them as they play in school sports teams. The boys of American suburbia graduate, like clockwork, through the great traditions of proms and homecomings and graduation walks, inheriting regional inflections and folksy prepositional modifiers ("soften it up," "choke up on the bat," "hammer it in!"). These are boys who take after their fathers — a fact to which I was painfully aware, being the suburban son of an immigrant Brahmin who had seldom thrown a ball in his life.

India, too, has its own version of these boys, among the urban middle class for instance. But for the young rickshaw drivers of Araku Valley of late, the boy-to-man transition has lost its ritual timing. They spend their lives on the run from anything that resembles their fathers — struggling tribal farmers who, with just a loincloth covering their frail legs, knew only the village, and toiled after harvests that seemed to diminish with each year. The fathers drank hooch and struggled to sustain their families in an increasingly transactional and globalized rural landscape. The great tragedy of Araku Valley was that parents could pass on to children their land, but not their pride.

Look, then, at their sons: thin, short boys dressed in tight jeans, knock-off Chuck Taylors, and bright graphic t-shirts with slogans like, "Cannot Delete My Feelings For U!!" They purchase asymmetric haircuts that recall American punk bands from the mid-aughts: highlighted locks in the front, an edgy quiver of spikes in the back, and shorn tight on the sides. They share "hip-hop style" music with synthetic beats imported from cities around the world, to which they hold "hip-hop" dance competitions, mixing traditional tribal dance moves with the latest styles from Bollywood and Tollywood (the Telugu film industry). While their parents dance to folk music produced right in the village, on sheepskin drums and reed horns, the young rickshaw drivers simply press play on their phones.

For generations, tribal life in Araku Valley was defined by the inaccessibility of its hills and forests. Then, through the 90s and early aughts, Araku Valley was the site of an armed leftwing insurgency against the state. The armed Maoist insurgents of the 1990s may have disrupted the

rural social order, but they also reinforced the Valley's isolation from mainstream India, and turned the "unblemished" indigenous identity into a political symbol (Baviskar 1997; Guha 2007). Driven by dramatic accounts of Maoist country by writers like Arundhati Roy, I made the naïve and boyish calculation that by venturing into the most isolated reaches of the country, the heart of the "interior," I could step through a veil into the past. This instinct was wrong on two counts. First, the notion that indigenous places exist in a state of pristine isolation is a myth. Second, it naively assumes that history operates along a linear arc, with some areas further along than others.

There was no past there. The passengers on my bus up to the Valley were hard-faced tribal peasants carrying live chickens and sacks of grain, but at the destination, a gigantic billboard display from the local tourism authority inverted this image. The display juxtaposed two grinning women in heavy beads and complex facial piercings with an English message welcoming urban visitors to the Valley. After violently pushing the rebels out of the Valley in 2004, and replacing them with heavily-armed police, the Indian state took on an aggressive civilizational mission. It expanded welfare and work programs, distributed televisions and satellite dishes, placed tribal children into low-quality residential schools, and integrated the Valley's isolated sustenance farms into corporate production chains (Hingham and Shah 2013; Hoelscher et al. 2012; Hindu Businessline 2015). With these interventions, combined with unpredictable monsoons that left the likelihood of a good harvest increasingly up to chance, traditional agricultural livelihoods were no longer seen as viable by the time of my fieldwork. For a young Valley man, to be indigenous in the new Indian economy was to be more aware than ever of his poverty and powerlessness.

Amid this profound sense of instability and rural decline, young tribal men must reconstruct masculinities in which self-worth is no longer rooted in ancestral land. Over the span of a generation, young tribal men in Araku Valley reoriented their perceived place in the world, constructing new norms and social orders as old ones fall apart in the face of tectonic socioeconomic and climactic change across the Indian subcontinent (O'Brien et al. 2004; Breman 1985; Li 2010; Sundar 2010). How do marginalized young men access symbolic capital when intergenerational sources are not only slim, but are being rapidly devalued in a tumultuous process of macrosocial integration? Ramesh embodied the two largest categories into which Valley youth organized: the job-seekers, who sought education and permanent employment in the formal sector, and the rickshaw drivers, who made a living in the informal sector, usually after giving up hopes of a full-time job. Few tribal men were bold (or lucky) enough to do both.

Ruling the Roads

Like an asphalt artery, Araku Valley's main highway runs 27 dusty miles between its two major towns, before winding down on either end toward eastern India's coastal plains. From about half a dozen little marketplaces along the way – little ganglions of a few mom-and-pop stores, some government buildings, maybe an ATM – auto rickshaw stands run a taxi service along dirt lanes that fan out endlessly into the rugged hills, providing a tenuous but crucial connection for hundreds of

isolated tribal communities that dot a patchwork of brown fields and balding forests. The roughly 70 or so young rickshaw drivers working the Kinchumanda stand, nearly all of them younger than thirty, took turns running the communal loop line between the main road and the “Interior Place,” charging each passenger a fixed rate that was set by the Kinchumanda auto drivers’ union. Each morning they lined up on a first-come-first-serve basis, the driver at the front of the waiting to overload his three-wheeled tuk tuks with 10, 12, 15 people before heading out. Then it’s the next-in-line’s turn to do the same. After fuel and maintenance costs, a single run will net a driver about 400 rupees (roughly \$6) – twice that, on the rare days he gets to run twice.

The turn-based system meant that Ramesh, Ravi and the other the drivers spent long afternoons roaming the bazaar as they awaited their turn. They passed the hours by playing cards, sharing music and, most of all, egging on each other’s extreme efforts to pick up women. This they had developed into a science of sorts. Nearly every rickshaw had jerry-rigged bench seats in the front, on either side of the driver’s seat. These were reserved, Ravi told me, for the most attractive female customers: “Then, when he turns, he lifts his elbow up just a little bit higher, or he sways a little extra on bumpy stretches of the road. It’s a signal.”

Ramesh, at 28, was married with kids, and liked to refer to philandering as *going out to eat*. “Among all girls,” he declared, still reclining in his rickshaw, “80% will express real interest. Either they, one, know the guy is an asshole but go for it anyway; two, don’t know and fall for his tricks; or three, just want to have fun. Another 10 percent are in unhappy marriages and are looking to escape for a bit.

“And the final 10 percent,” he concluded with a flourish, “are *aunties*.”

“Aunties?” I asked.

“They’re middle-aged, their husbands are drunks, their kids are adults, they’re bored, so they come out here on market days looking for fit young men two to three times a week. Usually one of our boys will pick them and drive off to a field somewhere, and get the job done.”

The Kinchumanda rickshaw drivers frequently bragged to each other about their sexual exploits – particularly Ravi, who had cultivated a notorious reputation. Such blustering, categorical male obsession with sexual exploits – the pseudo-science, the bravado, the lust for older women -- was another startling, unexpected reminder of American suburbia. Tribal couples traditionally eschewed the hyper-ritualized arranged marriages, preferring instead to fall in love, and although tribal men often took on multiple wives (Kela 2012). But pick-up culture was, like the knock-off Chuck Taylors, one more new import into the Valley.

All I could see was talk (and street harassment). But comments by women like Chaitanya, a young shopkeeper in Kinchumanda, suggested that sexual norms were transforming on the female side as well. “The boys never mess with me since I won’t tolerate it, but most [Valley] girls don’t think like that. They only see a man who can provide for them,” she said. “All he has to do is buy her a ten-rupee makeup kit and she falls for it. They don’t mind becoming someone’s second wife even.

Sometimes they just want to have a good time. So they go around with these motor-field types, and don't really think about the consequences [of sex]."



Ramesh (center) and two other drivers show off their dance moves (from Nemana 2016).

Nearly everyone in Araku Valley referred to the work of rickshaw drivers as the “motor field,” which was both an English loan to the local lexicon, and a nod to India’s problem of idle young men. Motor field types dominated Kinchumanda’s small marketplace, ambling down the road with arms draped around each other. Not just that, older villagers and younger jobholders often complained, but they also gambled and drank to oblivion. They watched porn on their cell phones – right on the street! – and smuggled cannabis and tried to sleep with your teenage daughter as they dropped her off at school. Even mainstream Indian film and advertising tended to depict rickshaw drivers as perpetually out of place, for instance beeping their way through a dignified procession, or inappropriately falling in love with a wealthy woman.

The motor field, a tribal engineering student named Ashok explained, was much too *mass*. As in a mob, a horde, or a swarm, in a country that was already teeming with people. “I have friends in the motor field,” he said. “They wear garish clothes, and they tend to talk with a kind of slang. They don’t speak properly. It’s...it’s not how we should behave if we want to develop.”

Most of all, he added, Araku Valley’s rickshaw drivers neither tended to their family farms, out of deference to tradition and filial piety, nor successfully landed a permanent job, the only reliable ticket out of poverty in Indian tribal life. This last stereotype, at least, was true.

Decent People

“We all went to school,” one driver told me. “At least until the 10th grade, but a lot of us are graduates. No one could find a job.”

Ramesh, ever the social scientist, offered a more detailed breakdown. “I would say that, maybe, 50 percent of these fuckers just do it for the girls. Twenty-five percent do it because they genuinely need the work. And the rest just like to roam the streets, and this is how you can do that and still seem legit.”

“But pretty much all of our parents think we’re useless,” added Ravi, who had a notorious reputation in the stand for his sexual exploits. “So you can go home at the end of the evening, throw a hundred rupees in your father’s face and say –“

“Look, I earned something today, asshole.” Ramesh finished his statement, prompting a chorus of laughter from the gaggle of young men hanging around his auto.

Landing a permanent job – a real job, which gave benefits, cut taxes and reasonably promised to still exist when you showed up for work the next day – was a tribal family’s only real ticket out of poverty. Everybody knew that. Growing up in the Valley you saw, as sure as the hills were balding of their forests and the soil diminishing its yield, that the job holders in your village were growing fat from rich diets. You saw that although the Valley’s teachers, policemen and ITDA² staff now hailed from Scheduled Tribes³, they resembled the upper-caste officials who preceded them: big-bellied men who wore aviator sunglasses and collared shirts tucked into their jeans, women in chiffon saris and gold earrings who plaited their hair, leaving behind faint clouds of talcum powder as they sped past on their motorcycles. They built new houses with running water as the common streams dried up, and educated their children in the city while the everyone else ground through the severely underfunded public school system. You saw that people in this Bourdieusian middle class, as cultural ambassadors of the Indian state, called themselves “*decent*.”

Being decent meant avoiding beef, or alcohol of any kind, which took the fun out of the meat and liquor-heavy feasts of tribal celebrations. Decent people avoided those festivals’ raunchy public dances that extended late into the night, instead watching cricket and celebrating the Christian and Hindu holidays for entertainment. If a young tribal man or woman wanted to join the middle class, they had better start acting decent. Ramesh, however, had no interest in that sort of performance. His logic was simple: though the postal route paid well, he was never going to graduate from delivering letters to the small cluster of businesses on the main road from his village. Promotions required expensive bribes and politicking. And the shiny burn marks on his neck from a

² The Integrated Tribal Development Agency, the government body responsible for administration in Visakhapatnam Agency, the tribal reservation of which Araku Valley is a part.

³ Also known as *adivasis* or Scheduled Tribes (STs), as the Indian government officially designates the 104 million historically disadvantaged indigenous people in the country.

childhood accident were, like torn shirts or untreated cataracts or other stigmata of the poor, liabilities against professional advancement. He earned his respect on Kinchumanda's streets, not in some air-conditioned office.

"I had friends growing up who became job holders," Ramesh said one day, as he and the other drivers sat in an auto waiting for their turn. He grimaced. "We don't really talk anymore."

By "job holders," Ramesh meant people like his cousin Suresh, who grew up in the same village but spent an hour each day traveling to the main town, where he worked as a secretary at an all-girls' high school. The tension wasn't a money thing – in fact, Ramesh was the higher earner between the two. Instead, where Ramesh and his crew claimed their youthful turf outdoors, Suresh disagreed with his cousin's assessment of work. His current job was an indignation, sure, but temporarily until he found real employment. Besides, it offered him limitless access to the internet, which he used to email people living across the world, asking them about their lives, and Google image search the exotic places where they lived – Tokyo, New York City, Amsterdam.

Suresh had doe eyes. The motor field boys teased that it meant he was soft. Suresh himself proudly claimed to possess "hooker eyes," which he believed were naturally seductive and would one day help him win over a "nice girl" from a "good family" – although, as Ramesh was quick to point out, the virginal, office-bound Suresh was as yet inexperienced in love.

"Nobody ever helps me," Suresh liked to often remind me. "All my success I earned because I tried that hard." He understood the responsibilities of work from an early age: in high school, the principal made him head boy, and then during college he worked as an assistant warden in another residential school for tribal children. Suresh had faith in the rewards of acting decent. He dressed in conservative polyester button-down shirts and slacks, and studied diligently for his teacher placement exams. Still, although he avoided joining the motor field boys on their late night drinking bouts, Suresh obsessively kept track of their exploits. On our treks through the hills behind his village, Suresh loved to share his village's most morbid legends – for instance the story about Ramesh's older brother Chiranjeevi who, after murdering a woman in the neighboring village for her jewelry, was beaten and left for dead by her brothers, survived, and then successfully hid from the cops by shacking up with a lover in the city.

Suresh belonged to a category of young men that could more accurately be called "job seekers." Although job-seekers enjoyed the privilege of social approval, as a rule, they were more concerned with their motor field counterparts than the other way around. Ashok, the engineering student who referred to the auto drivers as "mass," would rant to me late into the night about his rickshaw driving friends who, he claimed, had no sense of romance in the way they treated their girlfriends, and no sense of wonder about the outside world. "Bro, it pisses me off to see how they behave," he would say. "Always so dramatic! But I'm a nice guy. I keep calm."

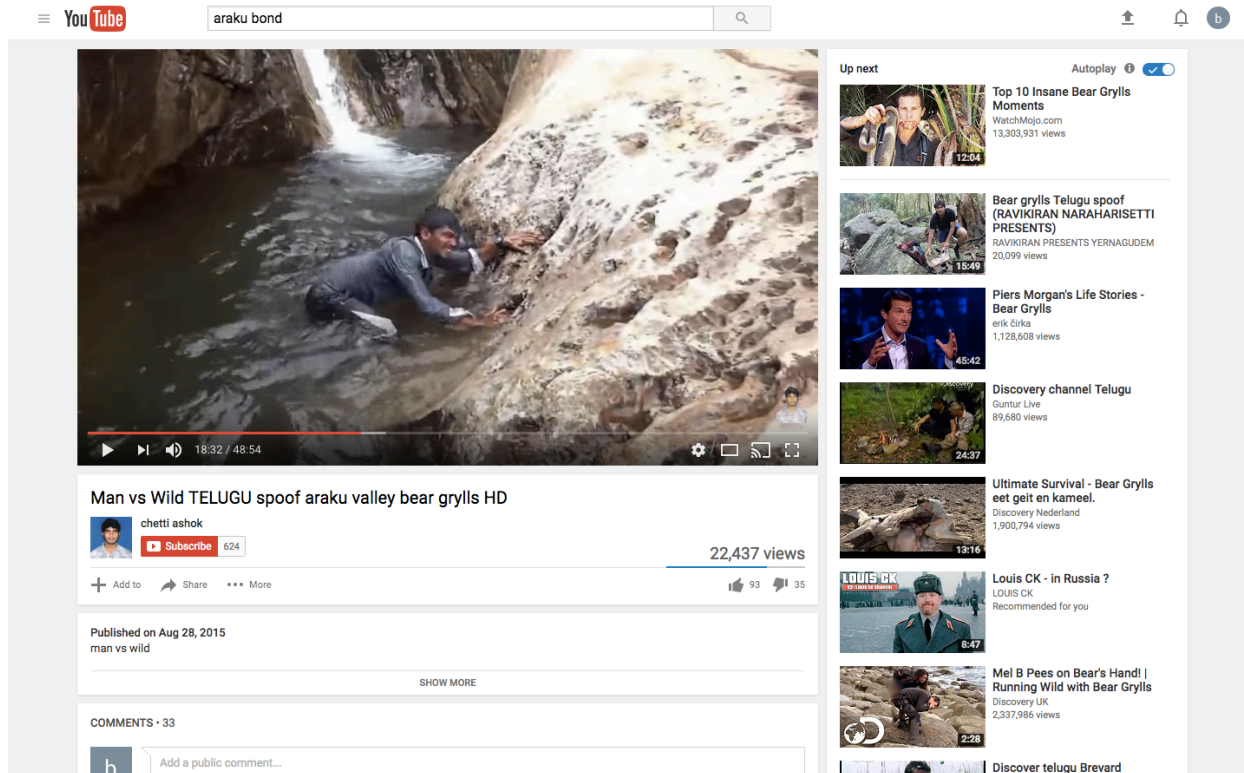
Like Suresh, Ashok too spend long hours trawling the internet, imagining worlds beyond the Valley. On the internet he discovered a personal hero in American nature channel host Bear Grylls, whose documentaries someone had dubbed into Telugu and uploaded to Youtube. He once spent

months making a parody version of Man vs. Wild, closing up his and cell phone repair shop early and retreating into the hills and forests nearby, where a friend filmed him leaping into streams and pretending to eat raw fish. The film, which eventually earned over 22 thousand views on Youtube, also won Ashok a female admirer from a nearby town, who contacted him on Facebook with her brother's account. But for all his rants and on-screen bravado, Ashok was no motor field boy when it came to women. In his telling, the two of them eventually met in a coffee shop, but sat staring at their hands in silence, too nervous to even order a drink. It was the closest he had ever come to a romantic experience.

For job-seekers like Suresh and Ashok, acting like the chaste middle class may have been the first step to joining it, but decency imposed its own set of humiliations. Most job-seekers were also unemployed. What distinguished them from motor field types was greater access to money and professional connections to prolong the search. But while permanent employment promised escape to higher socio-economic status, a young man could lose himself in perpetual search. Nearly every government job required applicants to pass a difficult exam, so tribal job seekers were more often than not continuously studying for something, continuously working their slim networks, continuously enrolled in distance learning courses that promised success in one or another of India's acronymnal order of exams – the D.Ed, B.Ed, CA/CPT, and the IPSLCE, which was the exam to join the police force. Candidates were selected based on an opaque combination of scores, bribes and internal references. Until that happened, the Valley's job seekers were "kaali" – the Telugu word for unemployment, a brand new concept in a place where hardly a generation ago one could always work the soil. The word also meant *emptiness*.

A Strange Divide

Where the rickshaw drivers like to imitate the movies, living out a notion of masculinity rooted in youth and numerical presence, the job seekers looked up to government officials, police officers, headmasters, older men whose confidence and virility arrives from their position and wealth. As Ravi, a teenager who was studying to exam to become a cop, explained, "The [circle inspector] goes everywhere with a group of constables at his back. If anyone fucks with him, or even looks at him the wrong way, his constables teach him a lesson. He doesn't even have to lift a finger himself. He's a total boss."



A screenshot from Ashok's Youtube movie, spoofing Bear Grylls.

Ravi's father supported his large family on a menial income, and their financial troubles grated on him. He was obsessed with status, asking everyone he met their salaries and carefully selecting clothing that could make him look wealthy at the lowest budget. For Ravi, a police job offered redemption through a potent combination of power and money. When I first met him, he was trying to arrange a large bribe to the local inspector to ensure his selection in the force.

Job seekers like Ravi peppered me with questions about life in the United States. They constantly texted me in English and commented on my Facebook profile. They got angry if I was ever in the area and forgot to call. But the rickshaw drivers, who had access to the same means of communication, seldom had any questions for me. They respectfully let me hang around, but I was just one passing curiosity among many. While the marketplace and rickshaw stand served as the foci for the motor field, job seekers congregated around the local cellphone repair shop, where they could access the internet, trade exam tips and hang out. If they wanted to drink, auto boys simply opened beers on the street of the Kinchumanda market. The job-seekers escaped to the woods, or to the roofs of their homes, where no one would bother them.

The job-seekers viewed escape as a locational endeavor; in the motor field, it was a matter of performance. While both groups experienced constant disadvantage in the impoverished Valley, the motor field boys having lived through just enough extra tragedy to nudge them towards a life

that, at the very least, provided social fulfillment and three square meals a day, if not cultural status. In declining rural places like Araku Valley, new normative structures and cultural aspirations reflect individuals' rational assessments about their chances in a rapidly stratifying world. If a man failed in the pursuit of middle-class economic security, he could still find self-worth in the street hierarchies organized around informal labor.

More than a source of income, then, membership in a motor field "gang" was a badge that could be worn around the Valley. It meant that you at least belonged to a crew that had your back. And like a team, the young members of each rickshaw stand in the Valley maintained solidarity beyond the realm of work, grouping together at local festivals and in competitive sports teams and dance troupes. On an earlier date, during the Sankranti harvest festival in January, I watched Ramesh and several other rickshaw drivers, as well as a number of their girlfriends, put on a break dance performance in a nearby village, strutting, shaking, and popping on a concrete stage – as if to subvert, through dance, the idea that tribal villages are too destitute to ever be cool (Nemana 2016). The Kinchumanda drivers, especially, liked to engage in long bouts of mythmaking about themselves.

"Motor field guys will try their hand at anything," said Ravi, the teenager who owed Ramesh money. "Volleyball, dance, mechanics. Doesn't matter if they don't know shit. Motor field boys do it anyway." A mischievous grin spread across his face. "You know none of us knew how to drive when we started? You just borrow your boy's auto and figure it out."

"Do you have a driver's license?" I asked.

He looked at me askance. "Ha, no. No one does."

The afternoon drifted by until it was time for a volleyball match between the Kinchumanda auto wallahs and a team from a nearby village. As a crowd gathered to watch Ravi and a couple of other young men bunted around a ball to warm up, Ramesh walked around collecting bets. The government had recently declared a policy of demonetization, outlawing old 500 and thousand rupee notes overnight and issuing garish purple two-thousand rupee notes (about \$30) in their stead. The new notes were useless for fare transactions, which seldom exceeded twenty rupees per person, but they were good for gambling.

Ramesh counted through a small stack of purple and pink notes when a man and two women on a motorcycle drove past. He widened his eyes, stuck the tip of his tongue through his teeth, and gleefully leered at the other others.

"It's like a movie with one hero and two heroines!" he laughed. "I once saw one guy on a bike with a *figure*⁴ strapped across his legs, facing him. They were romantically staring into each other's eyes so hard they almost crashed."

⁴ *Figure*, said in English, implies a young woman.

The image reminded me of a Kanye West music video where he performed the same stunt with Kim Kardashian. I wondered if the couple had seen it. "Why do you think they did that?" I asked.

"It's all the look, man. Everybody has something to prove."

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