

# The social life of transport infrastructures: Masculinities and everyday mobilities in Kolkata

Romit Chowdhury 

Durham University, UK

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## Abstract

Through ethnographic contact with the working lives of male autorickshaw drivers in contemporary Kolkata, India, this article unravels the gendered politics of co-presence in shared movement systems in the city. In doing so, it makes a feminist intervention in the literature on urban infrastructures by revealing precisely how ideas of masculinity operate as an invisible structuring principle of everyday mobility. The discussion foregrounds conflict, cooperation and disappointment as the key experiential axes along which male transport workers inhabit infrastructural space in the city. It argues that urban infrastructures are experienced by working-class men as a reminder of their struggle to accomplish the norm of respectable breadwinner masculinity, even as they function as a terrain which allows other expressions of masculinity – such as risk-taking, mastery over space, camaraderie – to be enacted and affirmed. Using a micro-sociological approach to understanding interactions in the spaces of commuting, this article brings into view the interface between cultures of masculinity and the social life of transport infrastructures through which gendered spatial inequalities are lived in the city.

## Keywords

feminism, infrastructure, masculinity, mobility, public transport

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### Corresponding author:

Romit Chowdhury, Department of Geography, Durham University, Lower Mountjoy, South Road, Durham, DH1 3LE.

Email: [chowdhury.romit@gmail.com](mailto:chowdhury.romit@gmail.com)

## 摘要

通过与印度加尔各答当代男性机动三轮车驾驶员工作生活的人类学接触，本文揭示了城市共享出行系统中共存的性别政治。藉此，本文对城市基础设施的文献进行了女权主义干预，而方法则是准确地揭示男性观念如何作为日常出行的一种无形的结构原则起作用。该讨论将冲突、合作和失望作为男性交通工作者居住在城市基础设施空间的主要体验轴心。本文认为，工人阶级男性对城市基础设施的经历提醒他们，努力实现体面的养家糊口便是男子气概的规范，这包括它们作为一个台阶，使男性其他类型的男子气概（如冒险、对空间的掌控、同志情谊）的表现得到实现和肯定。本文采用微观社会学的方法来理解通勤空间中的互动关系，探讨男性文化与交通基础设施社会生活之间的交互，通过这种交互，城市存在着性别化的空间不平等。

## 关键词

女权主义、基础设施、男子气概、出行、公共交通

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## Introduction

In the dominant imaginary of Kolkata – and urban India, more generally – motorised forms of public transport and their drivers are the very image of urban disorder. Both the English language press and the so-called vernacular press portray autorickshaw, bus and taxi drivers as a menacing threat to safety and public order in the city. Reported misdeeds of transport vehicle operators range from sexual assault, aggressive and violent behaviour, to capricious service. Letters written by readers to editors of prominent English newspapers in Kolkata convey the great dissatisfaction of the urban middle class with public transport workers. One such letter, published in *The Telegraph* (Mittra, 2012), rues, ‘Auto drivers change lanes at will, block the opposite flank of the road, graze new cars, misbehave, risk passengers’ safety and beat up people.’ It is common to encounter newspaper headlines denouncing ‘auto-crazy’, punning on the words ‘autorickshaw’ and ‘autocracy’ to signal the reign of terror allegedly orchestrated by autorickshaw drivers on city streets. A recent *Times of India* (Mittra, 2012) article, bearing the title ‘Rowdy auto drivers run

riot’, reported the hooliganism of autorickshaw operators in Kolkata as they protested at rising costs of fuel. Stories of autorickshaw operators molesting women passengers appear frequently in the news (Statesman News Service, 2014) Even as the media bemoans the powerlessness of the police to handle the ‘auto menace’, autorickshaw drivers themselves routinely protest against police atrocities. In early 2014, the transport minister had to organise a meeting with the autorickshaw union to discipline drivers in Kolkata about their misconduct with passengers, flouting traffic laws, recurring strikes and overcharging. As another *Times of India* report about autorickshaws (Ghosh, 2018) avers, ‘Harassment [is] not new for daily commuters.’

This article adopts a micro-sociological approach to consider what interactions in the spaces of everyday commuting can contribute to knowledge about the gendered character of urban infrastructures. Public transportation systems in cities operate not only as a physical link between different urban spaces, but also as a zone of contact between diverse social groups in the city. The ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005) of bodies and objects which characterises cities

is, therefore, acutely observable in the circuits of public transportation. Through ethnographic contact with the working lives of male autorickshaw drivers in contemporary Kolkata, India, the article unravels the gendered politics of co-presence in shared movement systems in the city. In doing so, it makes a feminist intervention in the literature on urban infrastructures by revealing precisely how ideas of masculinity operate as an invisible structuring principle of mobility in cities. Infrastructures often blend imperceptibly into the background of urban life, their workings invisible, especially to powerful social groups (Graham, 2010). Similarly, masculinity – its hegemonic configurations, in particular – in being the assumed norm against which all else is judged, has historically escaped scrutiny. While there is now a vast body of scholarship that has separately explored the social relations in which urban infrastructures and masculinities are embedded, these two fields of inquiry have so far not been brought into dialogue with one another. Just as masculinities are formed simultaneously in large-scale institutions and face-to-face relationships (Connell, 1996), so too do transport infrastructures operate as large-scale structures which yield socialities in the communicative contexts of shared travel (Bissell, 2010). The ethnography-led analyses of public transport in Kolkata that I offer in this article bring into view the interface between cultures of masculinity and the social life of transport infrastructures in the everyday city.

The turn to infrastructure, in the social sciences generally but specifically in urban studies, has entailed conceptualising provisioning systems not merely in terms of their functional capacities but also as having distinct social, spatial, political and aesthetic effects (Graham and Marvin, 2001; Larkin, 2013; McFarlane and Rutherford, 2008). A particularly insightful thread in this

discussion has suggested that urban infrastructures make possible particular forms of sociality in cities and that a number of experiences of community, solidarity and social friction are related to cities' material infrastructures (Amin, 2014; Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012). The experience of everyday life, it has been argued (Angelo and Hentschel, 2015), involves repeated encounters with varied infrastructural systems, to the extent that the nature of city living can be partially narrated as a story of interactions with urban technological arrangements. If indeed infrastructures produce ideals of normality in the everyday city (Graham and McFarlane, 2014), the existing literature on urban infrastructures seldom considers the manner in which ideals of gender circulating in the urban public infuse encounters with infrastructural systems. In other words, urban scholars have not yet given sustained attention to how urban residents 'do gender' in their everyday interactions with infrastructural arrangements in the city. Such a task would leaven critical urban theories which, despite their keen awareness of social inequalities, seldom address issues of gendered power (Peake, 2016). To this end, this article positions itself as an initial foray into gendering extant knowledge of urban infrastructures through the lens of masculinity.

The article unfolds as follows. After a note on the methods employed to conduct this study, I lay out the broad social context of Kolkata in which autorickshaws operate as a popular, if reviled, mode of public transport in the city. In the three ethnographic subsections which ensue, I foreground conflict, cooperation and disappointment as the key experiential axes along which male transport workers inhabit infrastructural space in the city. In the concluding section, I elaborate the relation between working-class masculinity and the urban infrastructural

landscape, and briefly sketch the broader implications of such gendered affordances of shared transport systems for the pursuit of critical urban infrastructure studies.

## Methodology

In Kolkata, the autorickshaw functions as a mode of neighbourhood transport, plying back and forth along a designated route, either within a locality or connecting a few adjacent neighbourhoods. Over a period of 15 months, I interviewed 20 autorickshaw operators and conducted participant observation along two autorickshaw routes in the city. While one route connects upper middle-class neighbourhoods in south Kolkata, the other route links a cluster of lower middle-class neighbourhoods to the commercial district in the central part of the city. My access to autorickshaw drivers was enabled by the routines of sociability that inflect this particular mode of transportation in the city and by my positionality as a young, cis gender, male researcher. In Kolkata, it is very common to see passengers develop sociable relations with autorickshaw drivers as a result of repeated encounters between them. In trying to identify potential interviewees, I inserted myself in these spaces of sociability as a way of establishing personal contact with autorickshaw operators. I would spend time at tea-stalls near an autorickshaw depot, where drivers and male passengers are often found having a moment's conversation before going on their way. I made no effort to hide my middle-class location from the operators by altering my attire or manner of speaking.

The first step in this fieldwork enterprise was simply to travel repeatedly on my selected routes as a passenger, making notes of flitting conversations between drivers, between drivers and passengers, among passengers, and occasionally between drivers and police. I paid particular attention to the

comportment of operators, the carriage of bodies inside the space of the vehicle, gestures and other non-verbal forms of exchange among commuters and with drivers. The nature of transport labour directed the kind of ethnographic contact that I was able to establish with autorickshaw drivers. I quickly learnt that these men work excruciatingly long hours, seldom taking more than a day off every week, if at all. It was impossible, therefore, to schedule an interview with an autorickshaw driver; doing so would mean compromising either their daily income or their meagre leisure hours. Hence, I had to conduct my interviews on the move, sitting beside the autorickshaw driver as a passenger would. I went back and forth on the route, speaking to drivers for anything ranging from an hour to two hours. I paid the drivers the fare that any passenger who did as many trips owed them. Such 'go-along' interviews meant that particular places along our journey naturally served as pegs for memory, in the sense that drivers would pass through a particular area and remember an incident of note that had transpired there.

In this article, the term 'masculinity' has been used to refer to such practices and speech-acts in which the meanings of manhood are at stake. Interpretations of masculinity/ties in this article are concerned with (a) practices and speech-acts through which male-identified persons signify their gendered selves, and (b) their relation to the reproduction of gender inequality in cities. In searching for the markings of masculinity in the social life of public transport systems in Kolkata, it has been vital to bear in mind the specific character of *bhadralok* patriarchy that infuses gender relations in Bengal. As Ray and Qayum (2009) remind us, the *bhadralok* is a man of culture and education, who uses his caste and class privilege to discharge his male responsibilities as protector and provider of his home. These standards

of hegemonic masculinity in the region are exceedingly difficult for working-class men to approximate in an urban economic climate where securing and holding down even a factory or office job appears to be an impossible feat. The social demands of masculinity with which autorickshaw drivers contend in the course of their daily labour in the city are embedded in these culturally specific relations of gender and class in Kolkata.

### **Autorickshaws in Kolkata**

The autorickshaw – which usually carries four passengers at a time: three on the rear seat and one beside the driver – was introduced to the public transport landscape of Kolkata in the year 1983. It was brought in by the state government as a self-employed scheme, as a way of addressing pervasive youth unemployment in the city at the time. Thus, while taxi- and hand-pulled rickshaw operators in the city have, historically, mostly been from outside West Bengal, the bus, minibus and cycle-rickshaw segments of the transport industry have a vast majority of Bengali workers. The autorickshaw was specifically introduced to provide employment to young local Bengali men (Sen, 2016). All transport workers in Kolkata, without exception, are men.<sup>1</sup> Reports show that the extent of public transport usage is highest in Kolkata among all Indian cities. Of all trips in Kolkata 80% take recourse to public transport, while the figures for Mumbai, Chennai and Delhi are 60%, 42%, and 42%, respectively (Pucher et al., 2005).

In 1987, the number of registered autorickshaws was 1865. The number of registered autos plying in the Kolkata Metropolitan Area in 2001 was 22,000 (Dutta, 2015). In present-day Kolkata, unlike other Tier 1 cities in India, autorickshaws ply within designated routes and on a shared basis, an arrangement that started in

the late 1990s. It is estimated that today 50% of autorickshaw routes traverse a distance of 3–8 km, while 40% cover 3–5 km. Although only 125 routes are officially registered, in practice well over 180 routes operate (Dutta, 2016). The income profile of autorickshaw drivers in Kolkata are as follows: Approximately 58% of them bring in between INR5000 and 10,000 every month; some 17% earn between INR10,000 and 15,000. Non-owner drivers have to pay approximately INR300 every day as rent to the owner. Daily fuel expenses amount to INR250. Most drivers work at least 12 hours per day, on a 6-day week schedule; many drive every day and only take breaks when unavoidable. Only about 30% of drivers have had at least a primary education. Surveys of the demographic profile of auto operators in Kolkata suggest that the majority of drivers are Bengali, Hindu, middle-aged, married men. Some 39% are between 26 and 35 years old, while 31% are between 36 and 45 years. Approximately 80% are Hindus, with a little over 60% of them falling among the general castes; 16.5% of drivers are Hindi-speakers. Over 80% of autorickshaw drivers are married (Sen, 2016). Survey research on the income profile of passengers of autorickshaws in Kolkata reveals a telling picture. An estimated 23% of passengers fall in the income range of INR10,000–15,000 per month; approximately 22% earn between INR15,000 and 20,000; 17% fall between INR20,000 and 30,000. These data are to be seen in the light of what is known about the earning capacity of bus passengers: 43.5% of them earn below INR2000 per month, and 33% of them earn between INR2000 and 5000 (Dutta, 2015). Thus, compared with regular bus passengers, the majority of those who use the autorickshaw to commute are relatively richer and are a part of India's new middle class, both economically and culturally. The popularity of the

autorickshaw as a mode of transport despite pervasive discontentment with its operators has to do with how it compares with other forms of transportation available to the urban commuter. As Sen (2016) points out, the autorickshaw is convenient in that it can be hailed at any point on the road, travels through interior lanes of neighbourhoods, is not overcrowded like the bus and metro, and has a vehicular design that is much more accommodative of people with mobility impediments.

It is useful to flag that the indictments of transport workers described at the start of this article are to be seen in relation to a more general attitude to the urban poor in Kolkata and India. In late 1996, for instance, the then left-front government in West Bengal took hawkers and informal vendors out of city streets overnight, in what was called 'Operation Sunshine'. The initiative was meant to impose middle-class values of order and hygiene in urban spaces and restore the 'gentleman's city' (Roy, 2004). The analyses of masculinity's relation to everyday mobility in the city which follow, need to be read in light of these broader urban processes in the region.

### Everyday conflict

In Kolkata, one order of conflict between drivers and passengers has to do with the autorickshaw being simultaneously a form of public transport and a privately owned vehicle. Drivers either own the vehicles themselves or, much more frequently, hire it from someone else. Some of the clash between drivers and passengers relates to the driver's demand that he be regarded as being 'in charge', even if he is not always the owner of the vehicle, and passengers' sense that this is a public good the use of which drivers merely facilitate. Everyday conflict around the proper way to inhabit the autorickshaw is rooted in drivers' awareness that

business depends on the autorickshaw service being available to all those who can pay the fare and their desire that the private ownership/guardianship of the vehicle also be acknowledged by passengers. Most middle-class passengers, bolstered by a sense of class entitlement to public utility services in the city, are unwilling to accede to this latter demand and emphasise instead, in speech and behaviour, the public character of the autorickshaw service. Such expressions of animosity between working-class men and middle-class passengers in transport services capture the link between the exercise of urban citizenship rights and male entitlement to property, a connection which might have intensified in a new cultural climate in India wherein not only is commodity consumption a key form of identity work, but also individual self-enterprise (Gooptu, 2013) is seen as the most rewarding way towards upward social mobility. Such contestations in the circuits of everyday commuting in the city also bear witness to the urban middle classes' willingness to participate in the privatisation of public spaces in ways that expand their hold over the city, while taking recourse to a bourgeois notion of public good to reject the working poor's right to access public property. To the extent that gendered values often serve as an ideological ground on which class differentiations are enacted (Parry, 2014), it is worth bearing in mind that cars have a specific relationship to ideals of masculinity; cars are seen variously as an extension of the male body or are feminised as an object to be forced into submission (McLean, 2009). For the working-class urban male, without the means to purchase a private car, exercising such tenuous proprietorial control over a public transport vehicle becomes a form of enacting masculinity in the city.

For instance, drivers and passengers fall out all too often over the issue of the vehicle's speed. Complaints about reckless

driving recurred in my interviews with passengers, even as auto operators alleged that passengers pressurised them to drive fast to get to their destinations quickly. Conversely, the need to brake, especially when impelled by a sudden request on behalf of passengers, is often experienced as an affront by autorickshaw drivers, such that 'being made to' slow down is experienced as having been aggressed upon, signalling the continuity which men forge between their bodies and the bodies of the vehicles they drive. Consider this field note:

As our autorickshaw is moving, another comes up next to us. The other driver, also in his early 20s, signals to this driver, making a zig-zag motion with his hands, indicating that this driver doesn't know how to drive straight. This immediately sparks off a race on a long stretch of a major road, and lasts a good five minutes. The driver of the vehicle I am in 'loses' because a taxi emerging from an interior lane intercepts his passage.

Episodes such as this, which seriously compromise safety on city streets without any provocation from passengers, were far more common in the course of my ethnography than commuters urging drivers to drive fast. Indeed, while passengers are often impatient to get moving and, in the process, ignore the economic imperatives of the drivers to have a full complement of passengers, their demands seldom involve asking the driver to speed. On the contrary, several autorickshaw operators narrated with relish the thrill they derive from speeding:

I like driving fast. Why? What can I do, the gear wants higher speed! Not that I drive in an insecure way. Smart driving, that's what I like. That means bypassing all this traffic cleverly, without touching any other vehicle or making your passengers feel uncomfortable. I love driving. It's like a video game for adults. All the vehicles around you are like different levels of difficulty in a video game. You have to find

a way to evade all these obstructions and get ahead. I feel I am handling this tricky situation and moving ahead. It feels good. Though, I prefer driving a four-wheeler. Then I feel like Nicholas Cage!<sup>2</sup>

There are now a number of studies conducted in Western contexts which explore men's use of cars to negotiate with the demands of masculinity (Balkmar, 2014; Bengry-Howell, 2005). The two excerpts above – in particular, the repeated references to tropes in contemporary visual and gaming cultures which valorise speed and racing – help us to identify the expressive possibilities of public transport infrastructures for the male driver as they relate to everyday life in the city. Interior lanes of neighbourhoods in Indian cities are routinely used by male youth to play sports. The impromptu racing competition between two auto drivers, by yoking speed with entertainment, captures how men's desire for leisurely pursuits may be displaced onto city spaces, wherein men collectively imagine and inhabit the city's main streets as a sporting ground. Scholars have argued that car cultures participate in the reproduction of traditional norms of masculinity with their emphasis on 'competitiveness, freedom, mateship, display, technical skill and ability, speed and performance' (Walker et al., 2000: 157). Through the enactment of such forms of play with other men, male transport vehicle operators exercise claim on a city that is perpetually recoiling from their reach, as a site of both labour and leisure. The second narrative accentuates the man's 'embodied symbiosis with his machine' (Mellström, 2004: 368) and establishes intentional risk-taking – what this autorickshaw driver calls 'smart driving' – as a psychological and behavioural strategy for men in coming to grips with the challenges of everyday life on the street. The imaginative reconstruction of road traffic as a video game allows the working-class transport vehicle

operator to position himself as successfully manoeuvring the pressures of urban life, wherein the different elements in the transport infrastructural landscape become metonyms for such vagaries of city living as the labour market, physical danger, law, interpersonal quarrels and harsh weather.

Urban restructuring in India, especially in the post-liberalisation period, has proceeded by systematically reducing the visibility of the working poor while ensuring their availability to provide essential services to the middle classes. A large body of scholarship (Donner, 2012; Fernandes, 2004; Srivastava, 2015) has outlined the spatial forms that such processes of marginalisation take. In this context it is useful to consider the ways in which social compulsions of masculinity inflect class contests around urban space and routines of everyday mobility in the city. The following field note captures spatial expressions of class relations between men in their encounters with urban transport infrastructures.

This autorickshaw driver was in his mid-twenties, his hair oiled abundantly and combed back, shirt and pants hanging loose on his thin frame. He was joking around with other drivers, as I waited inside his vehicle. Engrossed in the levity of the scene, I was surprised when an elderly middle-class man (over 70 years) hobbled towards the drivers to ask if this autorickshaw would go past Big Bazaar (a popular departmental store) and the young driver snapped at him in response: 'You should have taken the auto going to Garia.' The elderly man looked flustered and asked where he should go; he was told, grumpily, to sit in this vehicle. We started off when another man (about 60 years of age) and a woman aged about 30 years joined us in this autorickshaw. When we reached the departmental store, the driver alerted the elderly man; he, however, still looked lost and said that this was not the store he was looking for. He then mentioned

Highland Park – which was in another direction – and that he was from New Delhi and was not familiar with Kolkata. The driver offered to drop him off at a point on his route which was closest to where this man wanted to go. I was struck by his helpful tone, in sharp contrast to his earlier irritable response. When we reached this crossroad, the driver again informed the man and, along with the other passengers, advised him on how to reach his destination. To my utter surprise the elderly man began to chastise the driver saying, 'You got a person unfamiliar with the city and you took him on a ride, didn't you?' Enraged, the driver reacted: 'Did I ask you to take the wrong auto? Don't put the blame on me! This is why one should not help you people; I should have let you off at the wrong place itself!'

When Walter Benjamin (2006: 1) writes, in an oft-quoted passage, 'Not to find one's way around a city does not mean much. But to lose one's way in a city, as one loses one's way in a forest, requires some schooling', he is clearly thinking of this urban experience as unmarked by gender. Benjamin's idea that enjoying being lost in the city needs some form of learning, however, is useful to sociologically understand gender differences in spatial ability. While the freedom to roam and relish the possibilities that being lost in the city can offer is a peculiarly male privilege (though curtailed by other vectors of social inequality), it is experienced by men as enjoyment only when they choose to be lost. While navigating the city in an intentional way, the ability to master urban space by knowing the physical characteristics of cities intimately is often a matter of masculine pride. In other words, being lost in the city can be experienced by men as loss of control and as a hurdle to accomplishing mastery of space (Srivastava, 2010) as a prized index of masculinity. Control – and competition with those who threaten this sense of control – is a vital component of hegemonic masculinity,



to the extent that situations in public spaces which lead to a loss of control generate fear in men (Day et al., 2003). If we now return to the scene described above, it becomes clear that the relative infirmity of old age, coupled with the vulnerability of being in an unfamiliar city and a middle-class suspicion of being deceived by working-class people, inclines the elderly man to think that he has been deliberately misled. This threatens his need to be in control of his spatial surroundings. When the older man alleges cheating, he is mistakenly reading public transport in terms of his experience in New Delhi. In Kolkata, autorickshaws do not run on a meter and have fixed fares. Therefore, while taxis in Kolkata may take longer routes to extract higher pay from unsuspecting passengers, the autos cannot do so because they ply on designated routes and on a shared basis. The younger man, on his part, reads this accusation as yet another instance of middle-class ingratitude to the working class, and also as older men's tendency to wield authority over younger people. It has been suggested that through micro interactions with/in urban infrastructure, urbanites interpret large-scale processes and read their situations in the wider social environment (Angelo and Hentschel, 2015). The mundane interaction described here conveys how spatial imperatives of masculinity mediate men's competing sense of how transport infrastructures ought to be inhabited.

Critical approaches to the study of urban infrastructures have emphasised the social relations between bodies and things which provisioning systems assemble. A feminist reading of infrastructure offers the important reminder that the body is always sexed and hence a locus of cultural norms of gender. This subsection has sought to integrate such a perspective into studies of urban infrastructures. It has done so by excavating the imprints of gendered power on infrastructural systems and the manner in which

they mediate spatial contestations between different social groups of men in the city.

## **Gestures of cooperation**

It would, however, be a serious misrepresentation of urban interactions to suggest that hostility is predominant in all forms of co-presence in shared transport services in cities. In many cities of the Global South, precisely because transport services cannot always be relied on to function as desired, urban actors must actively identify ways to make transport provisioning in the city work for them. This frequently requires collaborating with familiar strangers. In the course of my fieldwork in Kolkata, I regularly observed various forms of sociability between autorickshaw drivers and passengers, ranging from respectful greetings and banter, to bawdy sexual humour, which bespoke the need for urban scholars to heed mundane cooperation as we theorise co-presence and shared use of urban infrastructures. Accordingly, the discussion on gestures of cooperation in this subsection follows the shift in infrastructure studies from an exclusive focus on physical structures to thinking about 'people as infrastructures' (Simone, 2004). Such an approach has emphasised the tenuous codes of collaboration between various urban actors which, through repetition, assume the form of infrastructural systems and hold together everyday urban living. The inherently protean character of cities makes urban living unpredictable. For this reason, inhabiting the city requires cultivating tacit knowledge of threat and who one can rely on in times of crisis. In what follows, I demonstrate the distinctly spatial character of such collaborative improvisations by which urban dwellers function as infrastructures of support, and the manner in which these efforts are marked by ideologies of gender and masculinity.

When their vehicles are blighted by technical faults – such as a flat tyre – drivers will stop an autorickshaw passing by to borrow its spare wheel. Indeed, a great proportion of passing conversations between autorickshaw drivers as they drive concerns vehicle maintenance, costs and procedures, and the traffic situation which inhibits better business. At a traffic signal, I once noticed an auto operator calling out to the adjacent auto driver: ‘Which company is your fan?’ The other driver smiled and responded: ‘This isn’t a fan; it’s a Haier company air-conditioner!’ I had noticed the medium-sized cardboard piece tied to the railing of the adjacent autorickshaw but it was this exchange that made me realise that it was intended as a makeshift fan, an effort at cooling on that extremely hot April day. The driver’s seat is the warmest because it is close to the windscreen and does not get any air. On another occasion, I noticed an autorickshaw slowing down to pick up a lost shoe from the road. The driver later explained to us, his passengers, that another driver on that route had misplaced his footwear and had asked other drivers to look out for it. Such experiments with infrastructure which cohere into a shared vocabulary of understanding between autorickshaw operators function as a communal resource to tide over the distresses – ranging from discomfort to danger – of transport labour in the city. Auto operators’ understanding of the hardships of the city derive substantially from a collective sense that these are the peculiar burdens of working-class men in the city as they strive to provide for their families. For example, a recurring concern among autorickshaw drivers is road mishaps. Although road accidents may happen to anyone who steps outdoors, the far longer duration of time spent on city streets makes the likelihood of physical danger for transport workers particularly acute. Autorickshaw operators are aware that they

are exposed to such urban dangers because they are poor men: they must earn to sustain their families and their options of employment are severely limited. Autorickshaw drivers, therefore, use the sociability and circumscribed geography of their trade to repose an element of confidence in each other. For public transport workers in the city, the abundant exposure to potentially hostile, even violent, strangers generates a constant state of unpredictability. Collaborating with one another to forge a culture of the street by which they can expect some measure of reliability from each other becomes a crucial strategy to deal with the uncertain character of transport labour. Thus, when urban actors collaborate to manufacture an infrastructure of mutual reliance on city streets, they do so by exploiting the spatial possibilities of particular physical infrastructures in the city. Moreover, the provocation for such creative moves stems substantially from a shared recognition of their class and gender locations in the city.

Indeed, the city’s potential for danger – even though it is variously conceived by different urban actors based on biography and social location – encapsulates both driver and passenger and becomes one of the bases for intersubjective understanding between them of the experience of moving through the city. I heard, for instance, an auto operator recounting to his passengers that a few days ago a woman in her 40s, in her hurry to get to the metro station, had fallen down and hurt herself severely. Passengers then proceeded to participate in this recounting by offering their stories of accidents. Such anecdotal sharing about urban accidents recurs in the interactions which take place inside the autorickshaw. Anthropologists have studied the relation between narrative and healing to show how people’s choices of narrative structure and rhetoric of expression are ways of emotionally processing

difficult life circumstances (Mattingly, 1998). Through collective storytelling, drivers and passengers together grapple with the physical hazards that everyday mobilities in the Indian city present. For instance, sometimes passengers use established narrative tropes to rein in a wayward driver: On one trip I heard a young woman passenger restrain a speeding driver by asking him cheekily, 'Brother, have you been possessed by Superman?' leading to peals of laughter all around, as even the driver's face broke out in a smile. Here, the exaggerated heroic masculinity of a well-known fictional character is ironically invoked by a woman passenger to coax the male driver to adopt a safer mode of urban navigation. On another occasion, an older woman gently placed her hand on the shoulder of a young driver, who was honking furiously, and asked, 'Why are you making so much noise unnecessarily, my child?' In this way, older women passengers may use a maternal vocabulary to chide unruly drivers, which operators may find acceptable and accede to.

It is worth emphasising that the infrastructure of support that is forged by the sociable routine of autorickshaws as they ply collectively along a familiar route, includes within its folds passengers as well. One evening I saw a woman (mid-30s, middle class) get inside an autorickshaw with two young children. The driver immediately asked a man sitting in the innermost seat of the vehicle to sit next to him instead. He explained to the male passenger that the woman and her children would be more comfortable if there was more air. I later asked this driver if he knew this woman; he replied that she was a familiar face among the many passengers he ferries, but nothing more. Public familiarities of this sort may conditionally enhance women's experience of everyday commuting, though it is important not to overstate this since familiarity may just as well authorise moral policing. Nevertheless, most autorickshaw operators reported, with fondness,

friendly relations they have with some passengers. Passengers and drivers may share chewing tobacco, tea, snacks, get to know each other as they wait for the vehicle to fill up and during commutes, even bring small gifts for one another. One young driver recalls an elderly middle-class woman passenger gifting him a small poster of a Hindu goddess with the blessing that it will bring him good fortune. The particular form of co-presence that the autorickshaw enables opens avenues for conviviality between drivers and passengers. Simmel (1949) describes sociability – 'association for its own sake' – as an ideal sociological world because in it every person's pleasure is dependent on the delight of others who are present. He characterises it as a form of 'play', as an 'artificial world' because, in a sociable gathering, people must necessarily denude themselves of their individual material interests in order for the association to be pleasurable. For this reason, Simmel argues, sociability only really works within the same class strata and not across social divides. Consider this moment in an autorickshaw which I witnessed during my fieldwork:

The autorickshaw slows down near a Montessori school, in front of which several women are waiting with toddlers; school is clearly over for the day. A woman in her early 30s boards the auto with her daughter. The woman continues speaking loudly to her daughter, cooing baby talk, asking the child why she has cried all day in school. The child affirms reluctantly that indeed she wept the entire day. This chatter generates a great deal of amused interest among the driver and passengers (a middle-class woman in her late 50s, and lower middle-class man in his early 40s) and they join in the conversation. The driver asks the child affectionately, 'What will happen if you cry like this every day in school, tell me?' Everyone in the auto is smiling and the atmosphere in the vehicle is one of affectionate banter. In a while, as the older woman gets off the vehicle and the other woman makes way

for her, the male passenger holds on to the child to help her mother.

Simone (2008: 76) has directed attention to the 'egalitarian ethos' that emerges when residents recognise their immersion in a common urban field and invest in forms of collaboration for mutual benefit in ways that subordinate rationales of social hierarchy. The scene described above distils one such artificial moment produced by the social life of transport infrastructure, which momentarily suspends class differentiations in the city. Such fleeting contact with strangers creates opportunities for the urbanite to temporarily dissolve the isolation of urban commuting and the inherent unpredictability of urban life in the company of friendly strangers. It is noteworthy, however, that the spontaneous joy of association between biographical strangers which the scene captures is facilitated by the respectability of young middle-class motherhood in the city at a respectable hour of the day. Indeed, the gestures of cooperation between male drivers and women commuters, which this discussion has documented, depend on a familial ideology of gender. Thus, when a woman restrains a rash driver, she does so by addressing him as her younger brother; when an older woman blesses a driver, she establishes with him a filial relation; when the driver assuages the discomfort of a woman travelling with her young children, he recognises her social role as a mother. These instances demonstrate the extent to which normative values of the public and intimate spheres structure everyday interactions in/with infrastructures in the city. The infrastructures of support through which men and women make shared movement systems viable for them rest on patriarchal valuations of the public-private divide. The public life of urban infrastructures is, therefore, better understood when considered in relation to the private, especially in Indian

cities where neighbourhoods create social interiors in public spaces through a range of everyday practices which provisionally domesticate the urban social.

### When infrastructures disappoint

The city as a space of 'aspirations' (Appadurai, 2004) and 'passions' (Amin and Thrift, 2002) has received much consideration in scholarship on urban life. It has been argued that infrastructures, in particular, hold out the promise of progress and the rewards of modernity and development (Anand et al., 2018). Autorickshaw operators' attitudes to urban infrastructures invite attention to the obverse of urban aspiration; that is, the city as a crucible of disappointment. In the reactions of transport workers to renovations in the city's built environment, urban infrastructures come to represent the enduring challenges of urban living for working-class men. In my exchanges with transport workers, I was struck by the number of autorickshaw operators who stressed that the city of Kolkata has not changed substantially over the years.

The city has remained the same since I was small. Yes, roads have improved, flyovers have been built, there are many more private cars, living here has become more expensive. But nothing much has changed for me.<sup>3</sup>

Post-liberalisation, India's middle classes have increasingly identified flyovers, highways, bridges, malls, multiplexes and gated residences as indices of a desired urban transformation (Donner, 2012). From improving the conditions of urban slums, the Kolkata Metropolitan Development Authority is now focused on building middle-class housing complexes, glitzy shopping destinations and new towns on the fringes of the city. The reactions of transport workers which emphasise the city's

unchanging character even in the face of rapid urban infrastructural development capture the peculiar entanglement of time and space through which working-class masculinities are made. Working-class men's lives bear witness to the changing infrastructural landscape of the city which only reproduces the conditions of their marginality over time. The face of the city might well have altered drastically, but in comparing their labouring lives with that of their fathers, transport workers do not see any qualitative improvement through this generational shift. 'Many of their fathers' difficulties in providing sufficiently for their families remain their struggle as well. For working-class men, therefore, urban infrastructures such as new roads, flyovers, malls and highways often come to emblemise failed promises. It is worth dwelling on the gendered character of this perception of infrastructures. That urban infrastructural change is read by transport workers through the lens of their roles within the family as providers demonstrates the extent to which the ideology of breadwinning mediates men's relationship with the city and its infrastructures. In giving expression to their predicaments in the city, several auto operators told me that they want 'passengers who will cooperate with us, who will have a sense that we are someone's father, someone's husband, someone's son, that our families need to eat and our children need to go to school'.<sup>4</sup> For working-class men, therefore, it is the struggle to approximate the male social role that leads them to read the city as a crucible of disappointment and urban infrastructures as symbols of empty promises. It is worth clarifying that this disappointment is not an outcome of disrupted social mobility alone; there is a gendered specificity to men's disenchantment with the promise of urban infrastructures. Working-class men increasingly find themselves in an urban milieu which semiotically suggests

that they are an anomaly in the new economic spaces that have opened up in Kolkata, not just in relation to middle-class men but also women. New jobs in the neo-liberal urban labour market are projected, in advertisements and billboards in the city's landscape, as particularly hospitable to women. Such narrative tropes in the city's visual landscape imply that the new Indian woman has privileged access to technical and higher education, corporate careers and greater choice in urban employment (Paul, 2013). Indeed, one effect of liberalisation in urban India has been the growth of new work opportunities for lower middle-class women in sectors such as beauty parlours, hotels, hospitals and malls (Shaw, 2012). In these changed circumstances, several local men who are unable to access such opportunities often use tactics of intimidation in urban neighbourhoods to extort some money and engage in petty crimes to make a living. Thus, they may extract payments from neighbourhood hawkers, real estate developers, new residents, and deal in illegal liquor, and steal electricity (Gooptu, 2007). In this climate, working-class men express a disenchantment with new physical infrastructures in the city as icons of a better future, and instead consider them to be emblematic of the extenuating conditions in which they strive to discharge their breadwinning roles.

Thus, even as public transport vehicle operators facilitate infrastructures of mobility for privileged others, they find themselves stuck, shut out from the rewards of infrastructural developments in the city. Some of the younger drivers harbour aspirations of moving out of the transport industry to drive private cars of important people, start small businesses or even join office work, because these professions are both more respectable and offer greater financial returns. Such yearnings are curtailed, however, by their assessment of what the city

makes possible for men of their social position. Most realise that they may never be able to make the switch to a more rewarding career. As a reaction to such disempowering assessments of their situations in the city, some drivers characterise transport work as affording, despite the poor monetary benefits, more freedom than a regular office job. Given the unavailability of practical alternatives, often the only ways to make their lives tolerable are discursive ones. Drivers stress that if you are born in a poor family, you have no option but to endure (*bardasht*) hardships. Infrastructural dispossession enjoins men on the economic and cultural margins of the city to formulate a pragmatics of urban dwelling. I asked a 38-year-old autorickshaw operator what his aspirations were as a child. He went quiet for a while; and then told me that he had several dreams but that there was no point in thinking about them now. I urged him to share what was on his mind:

I wanted to study more. Thought if I get a degree I will be able to provide better for my family. My sisters will also be able to get an education and do well for themselves. But none of that has happened.

Urban scholars have explored the new meanings that infrastructures take on when they suddenly fail and disrupt the metabolism of cities (Graham, 2010). The disappointments of transport workers recorded in this article draw thought to another kind of failure which urban infrastructures generate even when they remain technically functional. Even as infrastructures support the everyday mechanics of urban life, they connote the disrupted ambitions of marginalised social groups. Autorickshaw drivers in Kolkata assess their situations in the city partially through the hegemonic construction of *bhadralok* masculinity (Ray, 2000), which is premised on distance from hard physical

labour, high education and financial independence. The aspirations and disappointments of working-class Bengali men in Kolkata are driven by this master discourse of respectable masculinity in the region in the sense that these tenets of masculinity guide men's interactions with urban infrastructures in a fundamental way. Therefore, from their location on the margins of the urban labour market and in an urban milieu which refuses to acknowledge them as men worthy of respect, physical infrastructures of the city are a reminder to transport workers of their failure to approximate key indices of a socially valued form of masculinity.

## Conclusion

The 'new' approach to infrastructure, as we have seen, is distinguished by its emphasis on the social life of urban provisioning systems and the complex sociabilities they enable. The diagnosis of the social character of infrastructures has been an important conceptual addition to urban studies. This has entailed, in part, a turn to the everydayness of infrastructures in the city and the diverse effects that the encounters of urbanites with infrastructural arrangements generate (Graham and McFarlane, 2014). The discussion in this article builds on this scholarship to conceptualise public transportation in cities as a social field where rituals of urban inhabitation are learned and performed as specifically gendered acts. It identifies the various compulsions of masculinity which charge transport infrastructures with hostilities that override norms of urban civility, as well as augment sociable co-presence between and among genders in cities. Aiming to open up urban infrastructure studies to feminist insights, this article has sought to conduct a conversation with masculinity studies to reveal transport infrastructures in the city as enmeshed with different configurations of masculinity. If

critical urban theory has recuperated urban infrastructural systems from the cloak of invisibility, the objective of this article has been to shed light on the invisible regimes of masculinity through which infrastructures mediate the interactional order of the everyday city.

The ethnographic vignettes reported in this article suggest two kinds of entanglement between working-class masculinity and urban infrastructures. On the one hand, physical infrastructures of the city largely emblemise poor men's frustrated ambitions and operate as a conduit of gendered conflict with the urban middle class and women who are perceived to be upwardly mobile. On the other, the associational life of transport systems generates social infrastructures that enable them to collaborate with other urban actors and provisionally produce a web of reciprocal support. Transport workers make creative use of the autorickshaw's routines of sociability to generate a provisional architecture of cooperation that makes the everyday city hospitable for them. Thus, the urban infrastructural landscape exercises a dual pull on the gendered subjectivities of poor men in the city. Even as urban infrastructures are experienced by working-class men as a reminder of their struggle to accomplish the norm of respectable breadwinner masculinity, they also function as a terrain which allows other expressions of masculinity – such as risk-taking, mastery over space, male camaraderie – to be enacted and affirmed. The urban poor's encounters with infrastructure convey their effort to find a semblance of joy in everyday living, while fighting to survive in the city. Furthermore, by establishing quasi-familial ties with other drivers and passengers, transport workers forge a tenuous sense of community and reliability amidst the unpredictability

of urban life. While certain physical elements in the city's infrastructural landscape come to represent structural constraints to working-class masculinity – especially breadwinning and the respect that accompanies it – the social life of mobility infrastructures is seized by these men to develop other competencies of masculinity that allow them to inhabit the city with a measure of confidence. In these ways, cultural logics of masculinity infuse everyday encounters with urban infrastructural systems.

Ethnographic examples are useful not merely for illustrating a concept or argument but also for allowing them to be projected to new instances (Das, 2018). The closely observed analyses of masculinities and urban infrastructures offered in this article prepare the ground for studies of large-scale urban processes which would unpack ideologies of masculinity underlying infrastructural systems in the city. Inasmuch as infrastructures are ideologically produced as markers of modernity, progress and development, it seems necessary to attend to the gendered histories of these ideas, the liaisons between them and patriarchal power, and their spatial expression in different urban contexts. These connections should command the analytical attention of scholars of urban infrastructures interested in the gendered dimensions of spatial justice.

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## ORCID iD

Romit Chowdhury  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0334-2957>

## Notes

1. In early 2018, it was reported by the *Millennium Post* that the autorickshaw union had plans to train women drivers for a fleet of pink autorickshaws in Kolkata, as a way of addressing the problem of sexual assaults on women while commuting in the city (Team Millennium Post, 2018).
2. Interview with 34-year-old driver.
3. Interview with 43-year-old driver.
4. Interview with 38-year-old driver.

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